













# THE ROMANCE OF A ʔPAHI

# THE LOTUS LIBRARY

*Foolscap 8vo. Cloth, 1s. 6d. net, Leather, 2s. net*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>1 <b>The Latin Quarter.</b><br/>By Henry Murger.</p> <p>2 <b>Salambo.</b><br/>By Gustave Flaubert.</p> <p>3 <b>Thais.</b><br/>By Anatole France.</p> <p>4 <b>The Nabob.</b><br/>By Alphonse Daudet.</p> <p>5 <b>Drink.</b><br/>By Zola.</p> <p>6 <b>Madame Bovary.</b><br/>By Gustave Flaubert.</p> <p>7 <b>The Black Tulip.</b><br/>By Alexandre Dumas.</p> <p>8 <b>Sapho.</b><br/>By Alphonse Daudet.</p> <p>9 <b>A Woman's Soul.</b><br/>By Guy de Maupassant.</p> <p>10 <b>When it was Dark.</b><br/>By Guy Thorne.</p> <p>11 <b>La Faustina.</b><br/>By Edmond de Goncourt.</p> <p>12 <b>A Modern Man's Confession.</b><br/>By Alfred de Musset.</p> <p>13 <b>The Matapan Affair.</b><br/>By Fortuné du Boisgobey.</p> <p>14 <b>Vathek.</b><br/>By William Beckford.</p> <p>15 <b>Romance of a Harem.</b><br/>Translated from the French by<br/>C. Forestier-Walker.</p> <p>16 <b>Woman and Puppet.</b><br/>By Pierre Louys.</p> <p>17 <b>The Blackmailers.</b><br/>By Emile Gaboriau.</p> <p>18 <b>Adventures of Baron Munchausen.</b><br/>Introduction by Henry Blanchamp.</p> <p>19 <b>The Mummy's Romance.</b><br/>By Theophile Gautier.</p> <p>20 <b>The Blue Duchess.</b><br/>By Paul Bourget.</p> <p>21 <b>A Woman's Heart.</b><br/>By Paul Bourget.</p> <p>22 <b>A Good Natured Fellow.</b><br/>By Paul de Kock.</p> <p>23 <b>André Cornélis.</b><br/>By Paul Bourget.</p> <p>24 <b>The Rival Actresses.</b><br/>By Georges Ohnet.</p> | <p>25 <b>The Popinjay.</b><br/>By Alphonse Daudet.</p> <p>26 <b>Their Majesties the Kings.</b><br/>By Jules Lemaitre.</p> <p>27 <b>In Deep Abyss.</b><br/>By Georges Ohnet.</p> <p>28 <b>The Temptation of Saint Anthony.</b><br/>By Gustave Flaubert.</p> <p>29 <b>Captain Fracasse.</b><br/>By Theophile Gautier.</p> <p>30 <b>He and She.</b><br/>By Paul de Musset.</p> <p>31 <b>A Passion of the South.</b><br/>By Alphonse Daudet.</p> <p>32 <b>Mad'lle de Maupin.</b><br/>By Theophile Gautier.</p> <p>33 <b>Our Lady of Lies.</b><br/>By Paul Bourget.</p> <p>34 <b>The Disaster.</b><br/>By Paul and Victor Mauguierite.</p> <p>35 <b>The Woman of Mystery.</b><br/>By Georges Ohnet.</p> <p>36 <b>The Diamond Necklace.</b><br/>By Franz Funck-Brentano.</p> <p>37 <b>Cagliostro &amp; Co.</b><br/>By Franz Funck-Brentano.</p> <p>38 <b>Sebastopol.</b><br/>By Leo Tolstoy.</p> <p>39 <b>Sidonie's Revenge.</b><br/>By Alphonse Daudet.</p> <p>40 <b>Zyte.</b><br/>By Hector Malot.</p> <p>41 <b>The Dream.</b><br/>By Emile Zola.</p> <p>42 <b>The Poison Dealer.</b><br/>By Georges Ohnet.</p> <p>43 <b>Count Bruhl.</b><br/>By Joseph Kraszewski.</p> <p>44 <b>The Grentzer Sonata.</b><br/>By Leo Tolstoy.</p> <p>45 <b>The Outlaw of Iceland.</b><br/>By Victor Hugo.</p> <p>46 <b>The Romance of a Spahi.</b><br/>By Pierre Loti.</p> <p>47 <b>The Woman of the Hill.</b><br/>By "Une Circassienne."</p> <p>48 <b>Rasselas.</b><br/>By Samuel Johnson.</p> <p>49 <b>The Epicurean.</b><br/>By Thomas Moore.</p> <p>50 <b>The Red Shirts.</b><br/>By Paul Gault.</p> |
|--|--|

# THE ROMANCE OF A SPAHI

By  
PIERRE LOTI

English Version by  
G. F. MONKSHOOD  
and  
E. TRISTAN



LONDON

COLLIERIE & CO., LTD.  
1912



**DEDICATED**  
**TO**  
**L. S. W.**  
**WITH KINDEST WISHES**

**G. F. M.**

**HYDE VILLA,  
MITCHAM, SURREY**

~~University of Toronto Public Library~~  
~~No.~~ 1962 ~~Date~~ 22.1.97

# The Romance of a Spahi

## INTRODUCTION

### I

**I**N descending the coast of Africa, when one has gone beyond the south extremity of Morocco, one follows for days and nights an interminable, desolate land. It is the Sahara, 'The Great Sea Without Water.' The Moorish people also name it *Bled-el-Ateuch*—that is to say, The Land of Thirst.

These sands of the desert are five hundred leagues long, without a landmark for any vessel that passes; without a plant, without a sign of life. Solitude follows solitude with a sad mono-



## 8 The Romance of a Spahi

tony of shifting sand-hills and never-ending horizon, and the heat increases in intensity every day. And then, at last, there appears above the sands an old white city, planted with rare yellow palm trees.

It is Saint Louis of Senegal, the capital of Senegambia. A church, a mosque, a tower, and some houses built in the Moorish style of architecture. All seems asleep beneath the ardent rays of the sun, like the Portuguese towns that flourished of yore on the coast of the Congo, Saint Paul and Saint Philip of Benguela. One approaches, and is astonished to see that the town is not built upon the beach, that it has not even got a port, no communication with the exterior ; the coast, low and always straight, is inhospitable as that of the Sahara, and an eternal line of breakers forbids the landing of vessels. One perceives also that which could not be seen from afar : an immense number of human ant-hills, thatched little huts with pointed roofs, under which lives a

## The Romance of a Spahi 9

mixed negro population. These huts form two great towns, Guet-n'dar and N'dar-toute. They separate Saint Louis from the sea.

If one halts before this place one soon sees arrive long canoes manned by black men, who row whilst standing. These rowers are great lean negroes, admirable as to form and muscle, but with faces like gorillas. In passing through the breakers they are overturned ten times at least. With negro persistence, and with the agility and strength of clowns, ten times they right the boats and dash on their passage. Sweat and sea-water shine on their naked skins that look like varnished ebony. They arrive at last, however, and, smiling with an air of triumph, show their magnificent sets of teeth. Their 'costume' is composed of an amulet and a sort of necklace of glass. The thing in their care is a leaden box, carefully fastened—the letter-box.

Therein one finds the orders of the Governor for the ship that has arrived,

## 10 The Romance of a Spahi

and other letters of people of the colony. When pressed for time one can, without any fear, confide oneself to the hands of these men, certain of being fished out, always with the greatest care, and finally deposited upon the strand.

But it is more comfortable to pursue the route towards the south up to the mouth of the Senegal, where flat boats come to take you in tranquil style to Saint Louis on the tide. The isolating effect of the sea is 'the reason why' there is so much stagnation and sadness in this country.

Saint Louis would not do as a point of call for steamers, nor for merchant vessels that come from the other hemisphere. One *goes* there when one is forced to go there. But never does any one *travel* there in the usual sense of the phrase. It seems that people feel themselves prisoners there, and absolutely separated from the rest of the world.

# The Romance of a Spahi 11

## II

IN the northern quarter of Saint Louis, near the mosque, was a little old isolated house belonging to a certain Samba-Hamet. It was quite white, with walls of brick, and its outer part served as a home for countless ants and lizards. Two marabous haunted its roof, clacking their beaks at the sun, stretching out gravely their bald necks above the narrow and deserted street when, by chance, some one passed.

Oh the sadness of this particular part of Africa's soil!

A slender, spiny palm threw slowly each day its slight shadow along the hot wall. It was the sole tree in this quarter where no verdure refreshed the sight. Upon its yellow branches there often rested flights of those little birds that we call in France bengalis. All around was sand, always sand. Never moss or fresh herb on this soil, dried, desiccated, by all the burning breaths of the Sahara.

## 12 The Romance of a Spahi

### III

BELOW an old and horrible negress named Coura-n'diaye, an ancient favourite of a great black king, lived in the midst of the wreck of her fortune ; she had installed there her bizarre rags, her little slaves, goats, sheep, and skinny yellow dogs.

Above there was a vast square chamber with a high ceiling. To this chamber one arrived by an exterior staircase of worm-eaten wood.

### IV

EACH night a man in a red vest and wearing a Mussulman fez upon his head, a man who was a spahi, went into the house of Samba-Hamet at the hour of sunset.

The two marabouts of Coura-n'diaye regarded him from afar ; from the other extremity of the dead-and-alive town they recognised his style, his step, the colours of his costume, letting him enter

## The Romance of a Spahi 13

without exhibiting any inquietude, as though he were a personage known from of old. He was a man tall of figure, carrying his head up straight and proud. He was of the pure white race, although the sun of Africa had bronzed his face and throat deeply. This spahi was extremely beautiful, of a beauty that was male, and grave in character. He had big, clear eyes, lengthened rather like the eyes of Arabs; his fez, pushed back, let escape a mass of brown hair that tumbled over his large, pure-shaped forehead. The red vest fitted his figure admirably. There was in all his turnout a mixture of suppleness and force. He was usually serious and pensive; but his smile had grace and showed very white teeth.

### v

ONE evening the man in the red vest had more than ever the air of a dreamer of dreams, as he mounted the wooden staircase of Samba-Hamet. He entered

## 14 The Romance of a Spahi

the lofty room which was his, and appeared to be surprised to find it empty. It was a bizarre lodging the spahi had. Some benches covered with mats furnished his naked-looking chamber; some parchments that had been written by the priests of the Maghreb and various talismans hung from above. He went towards a big chest standing upon feet and ornamented with copper and colours, like those that serve the Yolofs as a place in which to hide their precious objects. He attempted to open it, and found it fastened. Then he stretched himself upon a tara, a sort of sofa of light laths that the negroes make there. Then he took from his vest a letter, which he began to read after he had kissed the place of the signature.

### VI

It was a love-letter without doubt, written by some pretty one—some fine young Parisian perhaps, or more likely some Romanesque *señora*, for this fine

## The Romance of a Spahi 15

Spahi of Africa seemed formed to play a great love part like the hero of a drama of passion. This paper that he was about to read may give us the kernel of some very dramatic adventure that will begin his history for us. . . .

### VII

THE letter upon which the spahi had pressed his lips carried the stamp of a village hidden in the Cévennes. It was written by a poor old hand, trembling and badly exercised in the art of writing. The lines ran anyhow, and errors were not lacking.

This letter said :

“ MY DEAR SON,

“ This present letter is to give you news of our health, which, for the moment, is very good, we thank the good God. But your father says that he feels himself growing older. His eyes fail him nowadays, and I, your old mother,

1962 Date 22.1.97



## 16 The Romance of a Spahi

take the pen to speak to you of us. You will excuse, knowing that I cannot write better. My dear son, this is to tell you that we have been in trouble for some time. Since three years ago, when you left, nothing has succeeded with us. Prosperity and joy left us at the same time that you did. The hail has almost ruined the field, and the cow has fallen sick and has cost us much to help her. Young men can do the work quicker than your father, and we have had to have the roof repaired.

“ I know that one does not get very rich in the Service, but your father says that if you can but send to us that which you have promised—without depriving yourself of necessities—it will be of very great use to us. The Mérys might very well lend to us, they who have plenty, but we don't want to ask them and be indebted to them. They are the last people to whom we want to go and plead poverty to. We often see your cousin Jeanne Méry. She gets better-looking every day. Nothing gives her greater pleasure

## The Romance of a Spahi 17

than to come and see us in order to talk about you. She says that she asks for nothing better than to be your wife, my dear Jean. But it is your father that does not want to hear of any marriage yet, because he says that we are so poor, and also because you have been rather a naughty boy in your time. None the less, I think myself that if you gain the stripes of a marshal, and if people see you come back with your beautiful military costume, everything will turn out right.

“ I should die content if I saw you married happily. You could, perhaps, then build a house near us, for ours would not be good enough for you. We make this sort of plans sometimes at night, Peyral and myself.

“ Anyhow, don't fail to send us a little money, my dear son, for really and truly we are in trouble. We have not got on a bit this year, as I have said, owing to the weather and the cow. I know that your father frets a lot, for he turns and twists about so much at night, dreaming of

## 18 The Romance of a Spahi

worry. If you can't send the lot—what you promised—send us just what you can. Good-bye, my dear son; the people of our village often ask about you and the date of your return. All the neighbours send you a greeting. As for me, you know very well I have not had a bit of joy since the day you went away. I must leave off now. I embrace you, and so does Peyral also.

“Your old mother who adores you,  
“FRANÇOISE PEYRAL.”

### VIII

JEAN leant upon his elbows at the window and went into a day-dream, gazing vaguely at the African scenery that unrolled itself before him. The silhouettes of huts, then afar off the tumbling sea and the eternal line of the breakers. A yellow sun, nearly sinking, still lighting the desert and the unending sand. A caravan in the distance guided by Moors, and crowds of birds of prey

## The Romance of a Spahi 19

planing in the air, and there, below, a point on which the man fixed his eyes : the cemetery of Sorr, to which place he had conducted some of his comrades, men of the mountains like himself, dead of the fever bred in this cursed climate.

Oh, to return there near to his own old people ! To live in a little house with Jeanne Méry quite near the paternal roof, modest though it was. Why had they sent him into exile in this land of Africa ? What had he and such a land in common ? And then this red costume and this Arab fez that had been thrust upon him and gave him such a grand air. . . . What a disguise for him, a poor peasant of the Cévennes. . . . And he rested there for a long time, absorbed in dreams of his village : poor devil of a warrior of Senegal.

The sun sank, night now wholly came, and, with the coming of night, sad thoughts. From N'dar-toute could be heard the beating of a drum calling the negroes to a meeting. Fires were lit in the huts. It was an evening in December ;

## 20 The Romance of a Spahi

a wicked winter wind roused up, making whirlwinds of the sand. It caused one to shiver, an unusual thing in this great burnt land.

The door opened and a tawny dog with straight ears and a jackal face came in and jumped about its master, and at the same time a young black girl appeared, gay and laughing. She made a little salute, brusque and comic, and said, "Kéou!" How do you do?

### IX

THE spahi threw towards her a distracted look.

"Fatou," said he in a dialect she understood, "open the chest that I may take my money out of it."

"Thy Khâliss!" (pieces of money) replied Fatou, opening her great whitish eyes under the black lids. "Thy Khâliss!" she repeated, with that admixture of fear and cheek that children sometimes

## The Romance of a Spahi 21

show when they are found out in some fault and fear to be thrashed.

• Then she showed her ears, to which hung three pairs of golden ornaments admirably made and embellished. They were of the style of the jewellery made in pure gold of Galam, of a marvellous delicacy, that the black artists have the secret of fashioning in the shadow of their little low tents. Most mysteriously they work crouched in the sand of the desert.

Fatou had bought some of these objects, and that was where the Khâliss of the spahi had gone. She had coveted something of the sort for a long time. She had spent about a hundred francs heaped up little by little, pathetic result of so many little economies in his soldier life ; money he desired to send to his aged parents.

The eyes of the spahi shot out an angry light and he picked up something

## 22 The Romance of a Spahi

as though to strike her, but his arm fell to his side. He could calm himself quickly, this Jean Peyral ; he was pleasant-mannered, above all with those who were weak. He made no reproaches. He knew that they were utterly useless. Besides, it was his own fault. Why had he not taken better care of his money, money that somehow or other he had now to get elsewhere ? Fatou knew what sort of cat's caresses to lavish on her lover ; she knew how to enlace him with her black arms ringed with silver bangles ; arms beautifully made, like those of a statue. She knew, too, how to press her soft breast against him and so throw him into that fever which would lead to the pardon of her fault. And the spahi let himself nonchalantly fall upon the couch near her. He put off till the morrow the search for the money that was awaited for so eagerly beyond there, in the cottage of his old parents.

## FIRST PART

### I

**I**T was three years ago, that Jean Peyral had set foot upon this part of Africa ; and since he had been there a great transformation had taken place in him. He had passed through several moral phases. His surroundings in general, the climate, the work of Nature, had exercised little by little upon his youthful brain their enervating influences. Slowly he had felt himself gliding down unknown slopes, and now, in these present days, he was the lover of Fatou, a young black girl of the race called Khassonké, who had thrown over him I know not what sensuous seduction, what amulet charm.

The history of Jean's past was not very complicated. At twenty years of



## 24 The Romance of a Spahi

age the ballot had taken him from his tearful old mother. He had departed like so many others of his village—singing aloud in order not to cry. His stature had indicated that he should be in the cavalry. The mysterious attraction of the unknown had made him choose the corps of the Spahis.

His childhood was lived in the Cévennes, in a little-known village in the midst of the woods.

In the grand, pure air of the mountains he had shot up like a strong young tree. The first pictures engraved upon his infant mind had been sane and simple : his father and his mother, two cherished figures, and then the family's abode, a little house of the olden time, under the chestnut trees. In his memory all that was inscribed deeply. It had a place apart, profound and secret. Then, too, there were the great woods and the search for fun in the woodland ways carpeted with moss. Oh, days of liberty !

During the first years of his life,

## The Romance of a Spahi 25

beyond this lone village where he was born, he knew nothing whatever of the world without. For him there existed nothing around that home but the wild country with its shepherds and mountaineers. In the woods where he roved free all the day he had the dreams that come to a little solitary boy, or shepherd. These dreams were varied by running, jumping, breaking branches of the trees, or trapping birds. One sad memory was the school of the village. It was a dark place where one had to keep tranquil between four walls. They gave up sending him there at last, for he always bolted away. On Sunday he had his splendid costume of a mountaineer and went to church with his mother, giving his hand to little Jeanne, whom they picked up on the way from the house of Uncle Méry. After that a game of ball in a great common field under the trees.

He early divined that he was finer in looks and stronger than the other children. In the games it was always he who was obeyed, and he got to expect

## 26 The Romance of a Spahi

others to submit to him. When he became bigger his independence and a continual need for movement became more accentuated. Galloping on some one's horses, or fooling with an old gun, he was always up to mischief, and often got into a row with the local guard, to the great despair of his Uncle Méry, who had dreamt all sorts of dreams of his settling down to a tranquil life and profession. It was true, as his mother had said in her letter, he had been rather a naughty boy, and in country places they never forget one's escapades even if they forgive them.

People loved him none the less, even those whom he had troubled, simply because he had a frank and open heart. One really could not take his pranks very seriously when he smiled 'that smile of his.' Besides, if you knew just how to talk to him you could lead him as easily as a tiny child. Uncle Méry with his sermons and menaces had no effect upon him at all, no influence whatsoever. But when his mother complained and he

## The Romance of a Spahi 27

felt sure he had caused real pain, *then* his heart was touched, and one could see this fine big fellow, who had now quite the air of a grown man, lower his head as though to hide his tears.

He was of a wild type, but not a libertine. When his twenty years had passed and the Service was before him, Jean was as pure and as ignorant as an infant.

### II

BUT afterwards all sorts of surprises were sprung upon him. He had been with his new comrades into places where men debauch, where he had learnt to know the meaning of love, or passion, in the midst of all that one sees in big towns, where kisses are sold for money. Surprise, a certain amount of disgust, and also the absorbing attraction of the novelty revealed to him had almost turned his young head. And then, after some days of a troubled life, a ship had borne him far away upon a sea that was

## 28 The Romance of a Spahi

calm and blue and had left him astounded and half stranded upon the coast of Senegal.

### III.

ONE day in November, at the time when the great baobabs let fall upon the sands their last lone leaves, Jean Peyral came and threw his first glance of curiosity upon this corner of the earth, where the hazard of fortune had condemned him to pass five years of his life. The strangeness of the country had first of all struck his fresh imagination. And then he had next felt in a very lively way the happiness of having a horse, of curling his moustache that grew so quick, of wearing Arab headgear and a vest of red, also a grand sabre. He knew he was a handsome man, and got joy out of the fact.

### IV

NOVEMBER. It was 'the beautiful season,' corresponding to our winter in France. The heat was not so great, and

## The Romance of a Spahi 29

• the dry wind of the desert had succeeded to the great storms of the summer.

• When 'la belle saison' commences in Senegal one can with complete security camp in the open air with an open tent. During six months not a drop of water falls in this parched land. Every day, without mercy, it is burnt by a devouring sun. It is the season loved by the lizards, but water is lacking in the water-wells, the marsh dries up, the green plant dies, and the cactus even opens no more its sad yellow flowers. None the less, the nights are cold ; at sunset there comes regularly a great sea-breeze, which makes the eternal breakers mutter and roar and sweeps away the leaves of autumn.

Sad autumn ! It does not bring the long evenings as in France, nor the first frosts nor golden fruits. No, fruit does not flourish in this God-forgotten land. Merely a few bitter pistachios. Winter, with a heat still torrid, gives the imagination a strange impression. Great hot plains, sad, desolate, covered with

## 30 The Romance of a Spahi

dead herbs, and where, here and there, rise meagre palm trees and colossal baobabs—the mastodons of vegetation—giving a home to vultures, lizards, and bats !

### V

WEARINESS came very quickly to find poor Jean. It was in reality a sort of melancholy that he had never felt before, vague, not to be defined. The homesickness for his native mountains, his village, and the cottage of his old people. The spahi's new companions had already trailed their great sabres in the different garrisons of India and Algeria. In their meeting-places in various maritime towns, where they had promenaded their youth, they had begun to acquire that libertine spirit that grew and increased as they went through the world ; they possessed, in various forms of slang, cynical or pleasant japes that they could use on all occasions. Brave lads at bottom, and joyous comrades, they had certain modes

## The Romance of a Spahi 31

of life that Jean did not at first understand, and pleasures that bred in him repugnance.

Jean was a dreamer ; the mountaineer mood, Reverie, is unknown to the people dwelling in the great towns. But among the men brought up in the fields, among the sailors and the sons of fishers, who have grown up in the paternal boat amidst the dangers of the sea, one can meet men who dream day-dreams. Mute poets who have ' thought things out ' and have learnt to comprehend. But they do not know how to give form to their impressions, they rest incapable of translating themselves.

Jean had a good deal of leisure at the barracks and he employed it in observing and in dreaming. Each evening he followed the immense shore, the bluish sands lit by unimaginable sunsets. He bathed in the great breakers of the African coast, amusing himself, like the child he still was, in rolling on the sand and covering himself. Sometimes he walked for long distances for the sole



## 32 The Romance of a Spahi

pleasure of movement and to fill his lungs with the salt air that sighed from the sea. 'The flatness, without end, wearied him and oppressed his imagination, accustomed to the look of the mountains. He felt a desire to go on and on and on as though to reach some horizon, to see 'the Land of Beyond.'

The sands at twilight were covered with people; fishers and caravan-folk from the interior. Then the bluish sand-dunes became rosy, the last horizontal lights ran over all this land of sand; the sun extinguished itself in blood-coloured vapours, and then all the black people threw themselves down, face to earth, for the last prayer of the night. It was the holy hour of Islam; from Mecca to the Saharan coast the name of Mahomet, repeated from mouth to mouth, passed like a mysterious breath over Africa. The old priests in floating robes, turning towards the sombre sea, recited their prayers, forehead in the sands, and surrounded by the devout. Silence came, and the night also with the rapidity that one

## The Romance of a Spahi 33

notices in lands of the sun. When night came Jean used to re-enter the quarters of the spahis in the south of Saint Louis.

In the great white saloon open to the night wind all was silent and tranquil. The numbered beds of the spahis were in a line along the naked walls. The spahis were outside. Jean entered at the hour when they were roaming the streets, running after their pleasures or their love affairs.

At that hour the quarters seemed very isolated and sad, and he dreamed more and more of his mother.

### VI

THERE are in the south of Saint Louis some old houses built of brick and of an Arab aspect. They are lit up at night, and throw on to the sand bands of red light at hours when most of the people are asleep in the dead town. From the houses there come the strange odours that are characteristic of the negro race

## 34 The Romance of a Spahi

and of alcohol, but mixed and developed by the torrid heat.

There also come forth at night from these houses the noises of pandemonium. There the spahis reign as masters, there the poor warriors of the red vest stupefy themselves and consume because they need it, or through bravado, incredible quantities of alcohol, using up also the mounting sap of their lives. The low, ignoble mulatto amours are to be obtained in these haunts, and there took place sometimes extravagant bacchanals, increased in intensity by the drinking of absinthe, and the climate. But Jean avoided with a sort of horror these 'pleasure resorts.' He was sparing, and set aside what he could out of his soldier pay for use at the happy moment of his return. Yes, he was wise and careful in that respect, and yet his comrades did not rally him on that point. Beau Muller, a great Alsace fellow, who had a past of duels and of adventures, held Jean in high esteem, and all the little world there followed the lead of Fritz Muller.

## The Romance of a Spahi 35

But the true friend of Jean was Nyàor-fall, the black spahi, an African giant of the magnificent race of the Fouta-Diallonké, a single and impassible figure with a fine Arab profile and a mystic smile that seemed to live on his thin lips. He was a beautiful statue of black marble.

Such a man was the friend of Jean. He led him to his home, sat him between his wives upon a white mat, and offered him negro hospitality in the shape of kouss-kouss and gourous.

### VII

EACH night at Saint Louis there was the same monotone that marks the life of our little colonial towns. The 'belle saison' brought a little animation into the funereal streets.

After sunset some women whom fever had spared promenaded European toilettes on Government Place, or in the alley of yellow palms of Guet-n'dar. If

## 36 The Romance of a Spahi

gave an impression of European life in this land of exile.

On this big Government Place, bordered with regular white buildings, one might almost believe oneself in some town of France were it not for the flat sand.

The rare promenaders of this spot all knew each other.

Jean gazed at them and they gazed at him. This splendid spahi who promenaded alone, with an air so grave and so severe, made the people of Saint Louis wonder. They supposed that he had had in his life at some time or other a romantic episode or adventure.

Over and above all a woman regarded Jean, a woman who was more elegant than the other and more pretty. She was of the mulatto class, so people said, but of such a white type that she looked quite Parisian. She had reddish hair and great eyes, circles with blue, eyes that half closed and moved slowly with a Creole languor. She was the wife of a rich man. But at Saint Louis they called her by her

## The Romance of a Spahi 37

first name in the disdainful way girls of colour usually are called. That name was Cora. She had been to Paris. The other women could see that by her toilettes. Jean was not capable of defining these, but could see that even her simplest robes had something particular, a grace that the others did not have. He saw above all this that she was beautiful, and as she always swept him with her looks he felt a sort of shock when he encountered her.

“She loves you, Peyral,” had declared the splendid Fritz Muller, with his knowing air of a man to whom had come amours and fond adventures.

### VIII

AND as a matter of fact she did love him, in her own mulattress sort of way, and one day she told him of her love.

## 38 The Romance of a Spahi

The two months that followed this avowal were passed by Jean in the midst of enchanted dreams. This unknown luxury, this elegant woman, so beautifully perfumed, troubled his mind and his unspoiled body. Love, of which up to the present he had but seen a cynical parody, now intoxicated him. And all this love which he now experienced had been given to him without any reservation, in one stroke, like the great fortunes that come to people in the fairy tales. This thought troubled him. This avowal of the young woman. Her lack of prudery shocked him a little when he came to turn it over in his mind. But he did not care to think of it often, and when near her he could not. He began to attend more to his toilette and used perfume and took care of hair and moustache. It seemed to him (as with all young lovers) that life opened out to him from the day that he had first met his love, and that all his past existence was a dream, a mere nothing.

## The Romance of a Spahi 39

### IX

GORA also loved. But the heart had small part in this affair. A mulattress of Bourbon, she had been brought up in the lazy sensuality of the rich Creoles. She had been held at arm's length by white women with an un pitying disdain—repulsed as being 'a girl of colour.' The same sort of race feeling had followed her to Saint Louis, though she was the wife of a man well to do. She was shunned.

At Paris she had had a number of admirers, very refined men. Her means had enabled her to cut a fine figure in France, and to take her share of the elegant and vicious life of the capital in proper style.

At present she had had enough of fine hands well gloved, and the tired airs of dandies. She had taken Jean because he was big and strong. She loved in her own peculiar fashion this big uncultivated plant. Loved his crude, simple ways, and even the rough attire he wore as a spahi.



## 40 The Romance of a Spahi

### X

THE abode of Cora was an immense house of bricks, having that aspect, a trifle Egyptian, of the old quarters of Saint Louis, and white as an Arab caravanserai. Below were large courts, where there crouched in the sand the camels and Moors of the desert, or where there was a mixed-up lot of beasts, dogs, and slaves. Above, many verandas sustained by massive square columns like the terraces of Babylon. One mounted to the chambers by stairways, from the outside, in white stone of a monumental look. All this tumbledown, ramshackle, sad as all that one sees at Saint Louis, a town that already has its past, a colony that is dying.

The *salon* had a certain air of grandeur with its fine old dimensions and its furniture of the last century. Lizards and cats haunted it and negress servants left musky odours upon its mats.

All, all sighed out an air of exile and of solitude. All seemed sad, and in particu-

## The Romance of a Spahi 41

lar at night, when the noises of the life around ceased and gave place to the eternal plaint of the breakers upon the coast of this part of Africa.

In the chamber that was Cora's own everything was more modern and joyful. The furniture and the hangings recently from Paris, exhaled an elegance that was fresh and that gave comfort. One could detect the odours of essences that were very fashionable, bought at Paris on the Boulevards.

It was there that Jean passed hours of madness or of intoxication. This chamber seemed to him to be an enchanted one. It surpassed all that he had ever dreamed of in the way of charming and luxurious things.

This woman had become his life, all his daily happiness. With the refinement of a creature tired as she was by pleasure in its ordinary, usual sense, she had desired to possess the soul of Jean as well as his body. With the 'cattishness' of the Creole she had played for this lover younger than herself a delightful comedy.

## 42 The Romance of a Spahi

of simplicity and love. She had succeeded. He belonged to her wholly and entirely.

### XI

A LITTLE, very comical negress, of whom Jean did not take much notice, lived in the house of Cora, in the position of a captive. This little girl was Fatou. She had been brought to Saint Louis, and sold as a slave by the Douaïch Moors, who had captured her in one of their raids in the country of the Khas-sonkés.

Her malice and her mad independence had obtained for her a curious place in the affairs of the house. She was considered a little plague, 'a useless mouth,' and a deplorable bargain. Not having yet reached 'the age of marriage,' at which age the negresses of Saint Louis considered it 'the thing' to dress themselves, she went about as a rule quite naked. There was certainly a necklace worn, and a sort of 'necklace' around the

## The Romance of a Spahi 43

•loins. Her hair was partly decorated and partly shaved or fancifully cut.

• One was quite struck or attracted by the type of Fatou. She was of the type of the tribe of Khassonké in all its purity. A little Greek form, with the skin tender and soft to the touch, black as a polished gem of black basalt, teeth of a shining pearly white, an extreme swiftness in the movement of the eyes—eyes of jade ceaseless in their movement. Eyes that rolled ever to left and right beneath black eyelids.

When Jean Peyral came from the house of his mistress he often met this young creature.

When she saw him she rolled herself in a blue garment she had (her special Sunday robe) and came towards him smiling, and •with her little fluty sort of voice, cattish and wheedling, she said, "Give me something, a little present in money." Jean had heard it often: sometimes he gave. When money was given to Fatou she hoarded it.

## 44 The Romance of a Spahi

### XII

ONE night in February Jean had a suspicion. Cora had begged him to go at midnight. At the moment of going he thought that he heard steps in the next room, impatient footsteps as of one who waited. At midnight Jean went, and then he returned with the soft steps of a wolf, making no noise whatever upon the sand. He climbed a wall and then was on a balcony. Thence he gazed into the chamber of Cora through the half-opened window.

Some one had taken his place near his mistress. A man, quite young, in the costume of an officer of the marines. He seemed to be wholly at his ease, as though at home, lounging in a fauteuil with an air of ease and disdain.

She was standing and they were conversing together. At first it seemed to Jean that they spoke an unknown tongue. There were certainly French words, but

## The Romance of a Spahi 45

he did not understand them. Some of the phrases seemed to him like mocking enigmas, having no apparent sense.

Cora did not look the same as she usually did. Her expression changed, a sort of smile passed over her lips, a smile such as he remembered to have once seen on the face of a fine girl who was in an evil place.

And Jean trembled. It seemed to him that all his blood flowed to his heart. In his head there was a dull murmur like the noise of the sea. His eyes were troubled. He was ashamed to be there. Still he wished to see and hear—and understand. He heard his name pronounced—they spoke of him. He drew nearer and heard words that were more distinct.

“You are wrong, Cora,” said the young man, with a very tranquil voice. “He is very fine, this boy, and then he loves you !”

“It is true, but I want two lovers. I have chosen you because you are named

## 46 The Romance of a Spahi

Jean as he is. Without that I should have been capable of making a mistake in talking to him. I get very distracted."

. . . . .

And then she approached the 'New' Jean. She had changed tone and face, and now, with feline movements, she murmured in her Creole accent; she spoke to him quite low and soft, infantile words, and held up to him her lips still warm from the kisses of the spahi.

. . . . .

But he had seen the pale face of Jean Peyral, who gazed at them through the half-opened door, and the marine indicated what he had seen by a movement of his hand.

The spahi was there immobile, petrified, fixing upon them his great haggard eyes. When he saw that he, too, was noticed he simply drew back into the shadow. Brusquely Cora had advanced towards him with the awful expression of an animal that had been interrupted in its love affairs. This woman instilled

## The Romance of a Spahi 47

into him a certain amount of fear. She was almost near enough to touch him, she shut the door with a gesture of rage and shot a bolt into its place. The mulattress in her, she descended from slaves, had reappeared with atrocious cynicism under the outward form of the elegant woman of pleasant manners; she had shown neither remorse, nor fear nor pity!

The woman of colour and her lover heard the sound as of a body dropping heavily to the earth, a sinister sort of sound in the silence of the night, and then, later, a sob behind that closed door, and a groping of hands seeking a way out in the obscurity. The spahi had gone, silently into the night.

### XIII

STRIDING onward without any aim, like a drunken man, Jean at last got to Guet-n'dar, the negro town of pointed huts. He often struck with his feet men and



## 48 The Romance of a Spahi

women sleeping on the ground rolled up in white. They looked like phantom folk. He strode on with a strange, lost feeling. Soon he found himself at the edge of the sombre sea. The breakers were making a great noise. With a shudder of horror he distinguished the crabs scurrying away before him in a compact mass. He remembered that once he had seen them feeding upon a corpse. He did not wish for an end of this type. But the breakers attracted him. He felt fascinated by them. They were now slightly silvered by the uncertain light of dawn. It seemed to him that their freshness would be sweet to his burning head, and that in their beneficent coolness death would be less cruel.

And then he recalled his mother—and Jeanne, the little friend and betrothed of his infancy. He did not wish to die. He let himself fall upon the sand and then sank into a heavy and strange sleep.

## The Romance of a Spahi 49

### XIV

IT had been full day for two hours, and Jean continued to sleep. He dreamed of his infancy and of the woods of Cévennes. It was always sombre in these woods, sombre with the mysterious obscurity of dreams ; his images were confused, like far-off memories.

He was there a child, with his mother, in the shadow of the old trees ; upon the earth, covered with lichen, he heaped up flowers.

. . . . .

And when he woke up he gazed around him, dazed.

The sands shone under the torrid sun ; some black women ornamented with necklaces and amulets walked upon the burning soil, singing strange airs. Great vultures passed and re-passed silently in the still air. The grasshoppers made a great noise.

## 50 The Romance of a Spahi

### XV

HE then saw that his head was sheltered under a canopy of blue stuff. It seemed to him that the designs of this blue stuff were already known to him. He turned his head and saw Fatou behind him, seated and rolling her eyes. She it was who had followed him and had sheltered him in the way mentioned. Without shelter he would certainly have had a mortal stroke, sleeping upon such sands.

It was she who had for several hours been seated, crouched upon the sand, in a state of ecstasy, kissing quite gently Jean's eyelids when no one was near, fearing to awaken him, to make him go, and so, perhaps, never again to have him all to herself alone. She was trembling once, for an instant fearing that Jean was dead. She would have been happy, perhaps, if he had been. For then she would have had him taken far away, very far, and would have remained there with him and have died by his side,

## The Romance of a Spahi 51

holding him so close that none could have separated them again. . . .

“ It is I,” said she, “ my white one. I have given you this shelter because I know that the sun of Saint Louis is not good for the ‘ Toubabs ’ of France. I know well,” the little creature continued in a jargon and with a tragic air, “ that there was another Toubab who came to see Her. I did not go to bed that night in order that I might hear what happened to you. I was hidden in the staircase under the calabashes. When you fell by the door I saw you. All the time I have guarded you. And then, when you were able to rise, I followed you ! ”

Jean lifted to her his big, astonished eyes full of tenderness and recognition. He was touched to the bottom of his heart.

“ Say nothing of it, little one. Return quick at present, and do not tell any one that I came here and slept on this place. Return to the house of your mistress at once, little Fatou, I also am returning now to the house of the spahis.” And he

## 52 The Romance of a Spahi

caressed her gently with his hand, absolutely as though she were the big old tom-cat who, at his quarters, came around him and on his soldier bed curled up near him.

She, quivering with pleasure at the innocent caress Jean gave her, her head lowered, her eyes half closed, a swooning feeling coming over her, picked up the garment that had sheltered him, folded it with care and took herself off, trembling with pleasure.

### XVI

POOR Jean ! To suffer was with him a new thing altogether ; and he revolted against that unknown power that now came to strain his heart in crushing bonds of iron.

Rage concentrated ; rage against this young man whom he wished to break in his hands ; rage against this woman whom he would have liked to murder with blows of his boots and spurs and riding-whip. He experienced all this, and, at the same time, I know not what

## The Romance of a Spahi 53

other worrying desires—the desire to move, to do, to act in some way. And then all the spahis bothered him and irritated him. He felt upon himself their curious looks, questioning already, and to-morrow, perhaps, these looks would become ironical.

Towards the night, he asked and obtained permission to depart with Nyaorfall to go and try some horses in the north of Barbary. This was, in sombre weather, a heady gallop across the sand of the desert. A winter sky—there are winter skies more rare than ours—astonishing and sinister over this desolate land: clouds, all of one piece, so black and so low that beneath them the plain seemed white, the desert seemed like steppes of snow without end. And when the two spahis passed, sweeping along in their *burnous* garb, the enormous vultures that walked about on the ground in groups, idly, now took a frightened flight and started to describe in the upper air fantastic curves.

## 54 The Romance of a Spahi

Again night had wholly come. Jean and Nyaor re-entered their quarters, bathed with perspiration and with their horses gasping.

### XVII

BUT after the over-excitement of this one day, the morrow brought fever with it. On that morrow they took him, inert, in a stretcher and on his poor little grey mattress, and he was carried to the hospital.

. . . . .

### XVIII

MIDDAY. The hospital is silent as a great house of the dead. Midday. The grasshopper is heard. The Nubian woman chants with her shrill voice a song that is sleepy and dreamy. Over all the extent of the desert plains of Senegal the sun shoots forth its rays of torrid heat and light, the horizon shimmers.

## The Romance of a Spahi 55

Midday. The hospital is silent as a great house of the dead. The long white galleries, the long corridors are empty. In the midst of the high bare wall, shining with lime-wash, the clock marks midday with its two slow points of iron. Around the dial there shines pale in the sun the grim device: 'Vitæ Fugaces Exhibet Horas.' The twelve strokes sound painfully from the feeble bell that was known so well to the patients and to the dying. That clock-bell that all who had lain in the hospital had heard in their feverish sleep. It sounded like a funeral bell rung in air too hot to conduct sound.

Midday! . . . The sad hour in which the sick perish. One breathes in this hospital the heavy airs of fever, like the indefinable airs of Death.

Above, in an open saloon, some voices that speak quite low; light sounds that are scarcely perceptible, careful steps of the good sister, walking with precaution upon the straw mats. She comes and



## 56 The Romance of a Spahi

goes with an agitated air, the Sister, Paçôme, pale and yellowish under her headgear. There were also a doctor and a priest seated near a bed that was surrounded with a white mosquito net. Outside, through the open windows, sun and sand, sand and sun, far-off blue lines and sparklings of light.

Would he pass away, this spahi? Is this the moment in which the soul of Jean is about to flee forth into the outer heavy midday air? So far from his hearth, where would he rest in these desert plains . . . to where vanish?

. . . . .

**But** no. The doctor, who has remained there a long time awaiting this supreme departure, is now about to retire softly.

The fresher hour of the evening has come, and the evening breeze brings its surcease to the dying. Death is for the morrow then, perhaps? But Jean is more calm and his head is less heated. Below, in the street, before the door, there was a little negress sitting, crouched

## The Romance of a Spahi 57

in the sand, who played a game with white pebbles so as not to attract attention from the passers-by.

She had been there since the morning, seeking not to attract attention, using dissimulation, in case some one in power chased her away. She did not dare to ask anything of anybody ; but she knew that if the spahi died, he would pass by that spot, through that door, and go from thence to the cemetery of Sorr.

### XIX

HE still had fever during a week, with delirium every midday. They still had fear, but the danger was passed, however, the malady fought and vanquished.

Oh those hot hours in the midst of the day, the hours that weigh so heavy upon the sick ! Those who have had fever on this coast of Africa know them, heavy hours of stupor and sleep. A little before midday Jean dozed. It was a sort of ' state of non-existence,' haunted by

## 58 The Romance of a Spahi

confused visions, with a persistent impression of suffering. And then, from time to time, he had a sensation of dying, and lost for an instant all knowledge of himself.

Towards four o'clock he woke up, and asked for water; the visions faded away, drawing back into the furthest corners of the room, behind the white curtains, and then fading away utterly. There was still left the pain in the head, as though some one had poured burning lead upon it; but the actual fit of fever had passed.

Among the figures, sweet or menacing, real or imaginary, that floated around him, two or three times he had recognised the lover of Cora, who, standing near the bed, regarded him with tenderness and vanished as soon as Jean opened and raised his eyes.

It was a dream, no doubt, like that which he had had of the people in his own village—people who in the dream had strange faces and seemed deformed in some way. But, singular thing, since

## The Romance of a Spahi 59

he had seen Cora's lover so standing by his bed he no longer felt any hatred towards him. One night he did not dream; but he actually, really saw his rival before him, wearing the same uniform that he had worn that time in the house of Cora.

His two officer's stripes shone upon his blue sleeve. He regarded him with his great eyes, lifting up his head a little and extending his feeble arms to touch him who was there.

Then the young officer, seeing that he was recognised, before he vanished, as usual, took the hand of Jean, and shaking it said simply, "Forgive!"

Tears, the first during illness, came to the eyes of the spahi and did him good.

### XX

THE convalescence was not long. Once the fever had passed, youth and strength soon had their way. But none the less he could not forget, poor Jean, and he

## 60 The Romance of a Spahi

suffered much. He had, at times, passed through his head mad despair, and ideas of vengeance almost savage in intensity ; then these soon passed and fell from him and he said next that he was capable of going through all the humiliations that she wished to inflict, just to see her again, to be hers and to have her as of yore.

His new friend, the officer of marines, returned from time to time to sit near his bed. He spoke to him simply, as one would speak to a sick child.

“ Jean,” said he one day very softly, “ Jean, you know that woman . . . if that will calm your spirit at all, that woman I am now saying to you, I will give you my word of honour that I have never seen her since that night . . . the night that you remember. There are many things that you do not know of, my dear Jean ; later you will comprehend that you should not have taken such a serious view of things . . . for so little. Besides, as to the woman in question, I will also make a vow to you never to see her again. . . .”

## The Romance of a Spahi 61

1 This conversation between them was the sole allusion made to Cora, and that promise, as a matter of fact, did calm Jean. •

Ah, yes. He understood now very well, the poor devil of a spahi, that there must be many things that he *had* not grasped the meaning of, but should have. Things that belonged to the customs of the people of a world more advanced than his little world ; perversities, tranquil and refined, that were beyond him. Little by little he came to love this new friend whom he could not comprehend, who was so suave after having been so cynical, who discussed all things with a calm, an ease that was inexplicable, and who came to him to offer him his protection, as an officer, by way of compensation for the anguish caused. But Jean had nothing to do with ' protection.' Neither advancement nor anything else touched him any more ; his heart, still very young, was quite filled with the bitterness of this first despair.

## 62 The Romance of a Spahi

### XXI

It was at the house of Madame Virginia-Scholastica (the missionaries sometimes, in naming their neophytes, get hold of some rare 'finds'). The time was one o'clock; the tavern was great and sombre; it was, as is usual with 'shady' places of this sort, closed by means of thick doors with iron fittings.

A little malodorous lamp lit, or partly lit, a confused mass of things that swarmed and sweated with discomfort in the thick atmosphere; there were red ~~veils~~ and the nudities of black flesh, clumsy caresses; on the tables, even on the floor, broken glasses and bottles, red caps and headgear of the negroes dragged with sabres of the spahis in pools of beer and alcohol.

In this evil tavern there was the hot temperature of a stove, a heat enough to make one mad, and the various odours were of absinthe, musk, spices, and . . . negro.

## The Romance of a Spahi 63

The 'jolly time' had indeed been joyous, and noisy above all; at present it was finished, finished were the songs and the racket and ragging; it was the period of depression after the drinking.

The spahis were there, some with glazing eyes set in a face that had fallen on to the table with idiotic smiles, others still dignified speaking with no uncertain voice about the drunken behaviour of those around them, and trying to make the overcome sit up. Fine figures of men with energetic types of face and grave eyes that had an expression of sadness and heartache.

Among them all, mixed up anyhow, there was a whole school of girls belonging to Madame Virginia-Scholastica, little negresses of about twelve years of age.

And outside all this, by lending one's ears to it, one could have heard from afar the cry of the jackals around the cemetery of Sorr, where many of those who were here were already fated to lie; had their place marked out for them under the sand.



## 64 The Romance of a Spahi

Dame Virginia, copper-coloured and thick-lipped, her crape hair done up in a red kerchief, drunk herself, sponged some blood from a blond head. A grand spahi, with a fresh-coloured face and hair like ripe wheat, was stretched out unconscious with a broken head, and Dame Virginia, aided by a black, drunker than herself, sponged the head and used a vinegar compress. Simply through fear of the police—simply that; not from humanity to the injured.

She was truly concerned, was Virginia. The blood continued to flow, it had filled a platter, and fear upset the old woman. Jean was seated in a corner, the most drunken of the lot, but stiff upon his seat, with his eyes staring but glassy. It was he who had made that wound with a latch pulled off an iron lock. He still held the thing in his hand, and didn't know he had injured anybody.

. . . . .

For a month, since his cure, people 'had seen Jean every night in such low

## The Romance of a Spahi 65

haunts, in the first flight of those who were bedrunken and 'off the metals,' showing off all the grand airs of the cynical and the debauched. There was a good deal of childishness in his case, but nevertheless he had run a terrible course since his period of suffering. He had devoured romances where everything was new and fresh to his imagination, and he had drunk in all sorts of extravagant, sickly ideas. Then he had run through the whole scale of the easy conquests of Saint Louis, dark and fair, his masculine beauty assuring him possession without resistance. And then, over and above all, he had taken to the drink !

Oh you who live the regulated family life seated peaceably each day at the hearth, do not presume to sit in judgment upon the marines, the spahis, those whom Fate has thrown with their ardent natures into an abnormal condition of life on the great sea or in the far-off lands of the sun, in the midst of privations unheard-of at home, of strange

## 66 The Romance of a Spahi

desires, of influences that you do not know.

Judge not these exiles and errants of whom the sufferings and joys, the tormented impressions are all, all unknown to you.

So, then, Jean took to drink, and he drank more than the others, he drank fearfully.

“ How can he do it ? ” people around him said. “ He who has not got the habit ? ”

It was precisely because he had ‘ not got the habit ’ that his head was so strong and that for the moment he could absorb more. And that placed him high among some of his comrades. But he remained almost chaste, poor Jean, in spite of his airs. He did not care to stoop to the caresses of black girls, and when those in the pay of Virginia laid hands upon him he chased them away like animals, and the unhappy young creatures got to consider him a sort of Fetish Man and ceased to approach him. But he was wicked when drunk, his head ‘ lost ’ and

## The Romance of a Spahi 67

his grand physical force unchained. He had struck out, all at once, for a mocking phrase, thrown out at hazard upon the subject of his amour, and then he recalled no more, but rested there motionless, with a stare in the eyes and always, with the blood-stained metal in his hand.

. . . . .

All at once his eyes shot out light. It was at the old woman, against whom he was now, without a known motive, seized with an access of rage, drunken rage, and he half rose, furious and menacing.

She uttered a harsh cry and had a minute of horrible fear.

"Seize hold of him," to some inert beings already asleep beneath the tables.

Some heads were raised, and some weak hands tried to hold Jean by his vest. Their 'help' was not of any use.

"Drink, something to drink," he cried, "you old devil of the night. You aged, horror, bring me drink!"

## 68 The Romance of a Spahi

"Yes, yes," she said, her voice strangled in her throat for very fear. "Yes, yes, the drink is here. Sam, quick, some absinthe and eau-de-vie."

She did not think of the expense in such moments.

Jean drank at one draught, flung his glass at the wall, and then fell back as though thunderstruck. He was finished. . . . He was no longer of danger to her.

She was strong, this old negress, solidly built, and had sobered, so with some aid from her servant and girls she got Jean lifted up, an inert mass, and then, after having made a rapid visit to his pockets for the last pieces of money he might have, she opened the door and slung him outside. Jean fell like a corpse, his arms extended, face in the sand, and the old harridan, pouring forth a torrent of curses and savage oaths, slammed the door.

XXII

FRANÇOISE PEYRAL to her son :

“ MY DEAR SON,

“ We have not had any reply to our letter, and Peyral says it's time something came. He is quite concerned every time the postman passes, and I am beginning to feel upset about it. But I always believe that the good God will guard my son. I have asked it so often, and that no ill-will come to him through bad conduct. If that ever did happen I should be very unhappy.

“ Your father says he knows what it was like in the army through comrades leading a man on to drink and gay girls. But I know my dear boy is wise and has ideas far from such things. Next month we will send you a little money. I know you will not spend it in waste when you think of the pains your father takes to get it. As for me, the pains of a woman do not much matter. I think only of him,

## 70 The Romance of a Spahi

the dear man. We talk ever of you in the evening, we and the neighbours.

“My dear son, your father and I embrace you with all our hearts; may the good God guard you !

“Your mother,

“FRANÇOISE PEYRAL.”

It was in the prison of the spahis' quarters, where Jean was locked up for drunkenness reported by the guard, that Jean received the above letter.

By a bit of good luck the wound of the spahi with the light hair was not very grave, and neither the wounded man nor his comrades had wished to denounce Jean. The latter, with his clothing stained and blood-spattered and his shirt in strips, had still in his head the fumes of alcohol. A sort of fog was before his eyes and he could hardly read. And now there was a veil, a thick veil, between him and his people. Cora ; his passion and his despair.

This veil fell at certain periods of vertigo, and then, when it lifted, his

## The Romance of a Spahi 71

thoughts returned softly, lovingly to the dear ones at home. In spite of all this, the poor letter, so confiding, must have touched his heart, for he kissed it with pious love and cried. And then he swore not to drink again ; and, as the habit had not become inveterate, he was able to hold himself strictly to his promise. Never did he stupefy himself again.

### XXIII

SOME days from then a circumstance quite unforeseen came along and brought into the life of Jean a diversion that was happy and necessary. The order was given to the spahis to go and establish themselves, men and beasts, for change of air at the encampment of Dialamban, south of Saint Louis, near the mouth of the river. The day of the departure Fatou went to the spahi's quarters to pay a farewell visit to her friend, who saluted her for the first time upon her



## 72 The Romance of a Spahi

two little black cheeks, and at night-time the spahis began to march.

Now as to Cora. The first moments of over-excitement once passed, she regretted her lovers. In truth, she loved both the Jeans. They spoke to her sense of sex equally; their appeal was similar.

Treated as a divinity by the spahi and as a mere woman by the other man—that pleased her; it possessed novelty. But people did not see her any more at Saint Louis trailing her long dresses in the sand. One day she departed on the sly, sent off by her husband, acting under advice received from authority, to a place a good deal further off. Fatou had opened her lips, no doubt, and Saint Louis had heard its last scandal about the lady.

### XXIV

A CALM night at the end of February, a true winter night, calm and cold after

## The Romance of a Spahi 73

a burning day. The column of spahis on the way to Dialamban traversed the plains of Legbar. The *Débândade* (or breaking of the ranks) is allowed according to the taste or fancy of each ; and Jean, who was in the extreme rear, went along tranquilly in company with his friend Nyaor.

The Sahara and the Soudan have these cold nights. They have the clear splendour of our own winter nights in France, but with more transparence and light. A silence as that of the dead reigns over this land at night. The sky is of a greenish blue, sombre, profound, starred infinitely. The moon lights up things and makes them clear as in the daytime. Further off, lost to view, are marshes covered with the sad vegetation of the mangrove : thus is all this part of Africa from the left bank of the river up to the inaccessible confines of Guinea.

Sirius arose, the moon is at its zenith, the silence is fearsome. On the rose-tinted sand were great bluish euphorbia

## 74 The Romance of a Spahi

(or spurge); their shadow is short and hard, the moon seems to 'cut out' the least of the shadows of trees with neatness and rigidity. They were motionless and full of mystery. There were vapours, too, at night more deleterious and more subtle than those of the day. One felt a penetrating sensation of cold, strange after the heat of the day. The humid air is quite impregnated with the odour of great marshes.

Here and there upon the line of route are great skeletons turned this way and that; they are of camels. There they are in the full clear light—the vultures have done.

. . . . .

From time to time there comes the cry of a bird of the marsh, heard in the midst of an immense calm.

. . . . .

At long distances from each other the baobab trees extend in the air their massive branches, and the moon gives

## The Romance of a Spahi 75

them a petrified look. In their branches are vultures asleep. Jean was astonished to see for the first time the intimate details of this land by night.

. . . . .

At two o'clock a concert of cries, like that of dogs, that bay at the moon, but more strangely sinister. In Saint Louis at nights Jean had heard the sound when the wind blew from the cemetery. But this night it was near, there in the scrub, that the melancholy chorus was chanted. They were jackals and hyenas. A battle was on between two bands of wanderers hunting for dead camels.

"What is that?" said Jean to the black spahi.

Presentiment, perhaps, but a sort of horror seized Jean. The note of the animals' voices gave him shudders, and made his hair stand up.

"Those who are dead," replied Nyaor, with an expressive gesture. "These beasts seek to devour."

Jean comprehended and trembled.

## 76 The Romance of a Spahi

Afterwards, each time that he heard in the night the lugubrious concert he recalled this explanation, and he who did not fear in the day shivered and became icy with one of the vague and sombre terrors of the superstitious mountaineer.

The noise died down, droned and ceased in the distance, and silence fell again. On sleeping waters the vapours thickened at the approach of day, and one felt penetrated by the icy humidity of the marsh. Strange sensation : in this country it is cold. The dew falls ; the moon little, by little, sinks to the Occident, veils itself and dies away. Solitude grips the heart. At last they reached Dialamban.

### XXV ‘

THE land was desert up to the environs of the encampment of Dialamban ; great marshes of dead waters or arid sand. Jean made long, solitary walks, gun on shoulder, always with his vague moun-

## The Romance of a Spahi 77

taineer dreams. He loved also to canoe on the yellow waters, and to explore the Senegalese marshes with their hot, tranquil waters, banks unfit for a safe footing, birds, mangroves, lizards, water-lilies, lotus, roses, all expanding and growing merely for the pleasure of the caymans and other fauna of the place.

. . . . .

Jean Peyral commenced to almost love this place.

.

### XXVI

THE month of May had arrived. The spahis gaily folded their baggage. They heaped up with ardour their tents and furniture. They were about to return to Saint Louis to retake possession of their great white barracks, repaired and repainted with lime. Then, too, they were going to find again their pleasures of old, their black sweethearts and the absinthe. The month of May! In our land of

## 78 The Romance of a Spahi

France the beautiful month of verdure and of flowers ; but in the depressing country of Dialamban nothing was fresh and green.

Tree or herbage, if it did not have its root in the yellow water, was dried, lifeless. For six months not a drop of water had fallen from the sky and the earth was athirst. Nevertheless, the temperature rose, the great, regular breezes of the evening had ceased, and the season of heavy heats and of torrents of rain had begun ; season that each year the Europeans of Senegal saw return with affright, because it brought them fever, anæmia, and often death !

However, one must have lived in this Land of Thirst to comprehend the delights of this first falling of the rain, the happiness that one feels in getting moist with the large drops of the first shower of the storm.

Oh, the first tornado ! In a motionless sky, leaden, a sort of sombre dome, a strange sky-sign mounts from the horizon. That mounts, mounts always,

## The Romance of a Spahi 79

taking unusual forms ; fearful. One would think at first that it was the eruption of a gigantic volcano, the explosion of a whole world. Great arches are designed in the sky, mounting always. . . . Artists who have painted the Deluge, the cataclysms of the primitive world, have not imagined aspects more fantastic than these skies, or more terrifying. And always there is not a breath of air, not a shudder of overwhelmed Nature.

. . . . .

Then, all at once, a terrible thing happens. A formidable stroke, as of a giant whip, lashes trees, herbs, birds, sways the very vultures, and overturns everything that is in the way. It is the tornado, unchained at last, and all Nature writhes under the fearful power of it, as of a passing meteor. . . .

During about twenty minutes all the cataracts of the sky were opened upon the earth, a deluge of rain refreshed the thirsting soil of Africa, and the wind



## 80 The Romance of a Spahi

blew with fury, strewing the land with leaves, branches, and debris.

. . . . .

And then, brusquely, all seemed appeased. It is finished. The last wind chases the last cloud, sweeps the last remnants of the cataclysm, the meteor passes, the sky becomes pure, motionless, and blue.

The first tornado surprised the spahis *en route*, and then there was a noisy and joyous scamper.

The village of Touroukambé was there upon the line of route, and they ran for it all in disorder. Women at work, playing children, fowls, dogs, all made in haste for the houses with pointed roofs.

The spahis invaded the place, and then there followed all over the place such a racket! Cries, laughter from the negroes, the noise of wind and tempest, and the thunder of artillery. A grand confusion beneath a black sky; obscurity in full day, torn by rapid green lights.

## The Romance of a Spahi 81

When the tornado passed, and order came again, they started once more upon the soaked route. Across the clear blue sky there were flying curious little clouds, and powerful and unusual odours came from the rain-refreshed earth.

### XXVII

At the entry at Saint Louis, Fatou was posted from the morning, in order to not miss the arrival of the column. When she saw Jean pass she saluted him with a careful *Kéou* and a little salute very *comme il faut*. She did not want to put him to any kind of ill-ease in the ranks, and had the good taste to wait two whole hours before going to present her compliments at the quarters.

Fatou had changed very much. In three months she had grown and developed like a tropical plant.

She no longer asked for sous ; she had even acquired a certain timid, girlish grace. A garment of white muslin now

## 82 The Romance of a Spahi

covered her rounded breast, as is usual when the girls become nubile. She had the odour of musk and soumaré. There were no more stiff little tails of hair upon her head. Her hair was now permitted to grow, and later was destined to be given over to the hands of a clever hair-dresser to be made into the complicated scaffold that surmounts the head of an African woman as a rule.

For the moment, too short as yet, it was a wavy mass, changing absolutely her physical appearance, which had become almost charming. Mixture of young girl, infant, and black devil, a very bizarre little person !

“She is pretty, the little one, Peyral, do you know that ?” said the spahis, smiling.

Jean had noticed, but at first it did not strike him much. He tried to take up his tranquil life of yore, promenades, rides, etc. The months of calm and reverie that he had passed at the camp did him good. He had almost found his moral stability ; the image of his

## The Romance of a Spahi 83

old parents and of his very young fiancée, awaiting him confidently at the village, had acquired over him their old charm and honest influence. He had done with childish bravado, and at present he could not explain how he became a client of Dame Virginia. Not only did he 'swear off' the absinthe, but swore to rest faithful to his fiancée up to the happy day of marriage.

### XXVIII

THE air was charged with effluvia, heavy and burning, with vital odours of young plants. Nature hastened to accomplish prodigious births.

Formerly, Jean, in the first moments of arrival, had thrown a look of disgust upon the black population: in his eyes they were all alike, the same simian face, and under that polish of oiled ebony he could not recognise one individual from another. Little by little, however, he

## 84 The Romance of a Spahi

could 'make out' the faces, distinguish them. Then, seeing the black girls pass with silver bracelets, he compared them and found this ugly, that one pretty, this fine, that one animal. The negresses now had characteristics like the white women, and he did not feel that they were all repugnant.

### XXIX

JUNE ! A springtime June, but a spring of the French sort, rapid, feverish, with enervating odours and the heaviness of storms. It was the time of the return of the butterflies, the birds, of the current of life itself. The humming-birds doffed their grey for their summer plumage. A little shade now came from the trees on to the humid soil. The mimosas flourished into huge bouquets in which the humming-birds sang with sweet little voices like swallows. The heavy baobab trees even had become dressed in a fresh leafage, pale and

## The Romance of a Spahi 85

tender. The soil had become covered with singular flowers, and the showers that fell on all this were hot and perfumed, and at night upon the high herbage, newly born, the fireflies flittered like sparks of phosphorus. . . . And Nature was in such haste to bring all this to pass that eight days did wonders.

### XXX

EVERY night, always, Jean encountered on his road the little Fatou, with her woolly little black head. The hair was growing quick—quick as spring flowers, and soon the clever *coiffeuses* would be called in to do their part and deck her head according to ancient usage.

### XXXI

PEOPLE married a good deal this spring. Often at night, during the enervating

## 86 The Romance of a Spahi

nights of June, Jean encountered one of these wedding processions, which defiled along the sand fantastically. 'All the world' sang, and the concert of these quaint voices was accompanied by the clapping of hands and the beating of tom-toms. These songs, this negro gaiety, had something heavily voluptuous about it, something sensual.

Jean visited often at Guet-n'dar his friend Nyaor, and these scenes of indoor life troubled him also, as if he felt himself sole of his kind, isolated from his like upon this mad earth. He dreamt of her whom he loved with the chaste love of youth, of Jeanne Méry. . . . *Hélas*, six months only had he been in Africa! To wait still more than four years before seeing her. He began to say to himself that his courage was failing him—that he could not keep a vow to live alone and chaste. Yes, he began to think that soon he would want some one to help him live his life of exile. But whom? Fatou perhaps—what a profanation of himself. And

## The Romance of a Spahi 87

then there was the other idea . . . the girls' at the house of the old Virginia ?

He had a sort of dignity, of instinctive prudery, that had preserved him up to now from any form of perverted sensuality. No, never would he descend so low !

### XXXII

HE promenaded every night, being a good walker. The storm showers continued to fall ; the great fetid marshes, the stagnant waters, saturated with the miasma of fevers, gained on the land every day ; a high vegetation of a herbaceous kind covered now this land of sand. In the eve the sun was pale as though from excess of heat and harmful vapours. At the hours when this yellow sun sank, when Jean found himself alone in the midst of these marshes so desolate, where all was so new and strange to his imagination, an



## 88 The Romance of a Spahi

inexplicable sadness came over him. He cast his regards all around the great flat horizon on which weighed vapours that did not seem to move. He could not understand very well what it was in him that was dismal and abnormal, why it was that he did not seem to fit in with the scheme of things around him, his present little world. He did not know quite what pulled at his heart-strings.

Above the humid plants hastened clouds of dragon-flies ; birds sang plaintively from the high vegetation ; and the eternal sadness of the Land of Thirst hung over all. At these twilight hours these marshes of Africa in the spring had a sadness that one simply cannot express with any known human tongue.

### XXXIII

“ *ANAMALIS fobil !* ” shouted the negroes in striking their tom-toms, their eyes inflamed, the muscles twisted, the

## The Romance of a Spahi 89

torso perspiring. . . . And everybody repeated the words, clapping their hands with frenzy. *Anamalis fobil!* (the translation of these words would burn the page).

*Anamalis fobil!* The first words, the dominant and the refrain of a devilish chant of passion and license, a chant of spring.

*Anamalis fobil!* was shouted out their unbridled desire, of the strength, the virility of the black overheated at the sun ; hysterical. . . .

Allcluia of negro love, hymn of the senses, chanted also by Nature, by the air, earth, plants, perfumes.

At the festivals of the spring the young men mix with the young girls, who are about to take with great pomp their nubile garment, and upon a maddening rhythm, upon a few exciting notes, they all chant and dance upon the sand : *Anamalis fobil!*

## 90 The Romance of a Spahi

### XXXIV

*ANAMALIS fobil!* All the great milky buds of the baobabs were spreading into tender leaves. . . . And Jean felt that this negro spring burnt his blood, that it ran like a poison heating his veins. The renewal of all things in the spring around him enervated. This life was not his.

Among the men the blood that boiled up was 'black blood'; among the plants the sap was poison; the flowers had dangerous perfumes, and even the beasts were venomous. With him, Jean, also the sap of spring was mounting in his twenty-six-year-old veins, but in a feverish manner that fatigued, and he felt himself more dying than living in all this terrible 'renewal.'

*Anamalis fobil!* How this spring strode or swept along! June scarcely finished and already under the influence of a mortal heat, in an atmosphere that was hardly to be lived in; already the

## The Romance of a Spahi 91

leaves yellowed, the plants were dying, and over-ripe things fell to the earth.

### XXXV

*ANAMALIS fobil!* It is a curious thing that the fruits, sharp, bitter, of the hottest countries (the gourous of Senegal, for instance) are detestable in our cooler, paler latitudes, but one appropriates, down there, to certain states of thirst or of sustenance . . . one can, there, long for them passionately, and they seem to you to be strangely exquisite. So was that little creature with her shock of black hair and the marble modelling of her dark flesh, her eyes of enamel that showed already what she longed for in Jean, eyes, however, that she lowered before him in an infantile assumption of timidity and prudery.

Savoury fruit of the Soudan, hastily ripened by the tropical spring, swollen with an intoxicating sap of life, full of

## 92 The Romance of a Spahi

pleasure that was feverish, unhealthy, unknown. . . .

### xxxvi

*ANAMALIS fobil!* Jean had hastily made his evening preparations for going out.

In the morning he had told Fatou to go at nightfall and await him at the foot of a certain baobab isolated in the marsh of Sorr.

And then, before going out, he had rested, his head very troubled, at one of the big windows of the barracks. Rested to reflect for a moment, to reflect if possible whilst breathing air a little less heavy. He trembled at that which he was about to do. If he had resisted several days it was because of sentiments very complicated that warred within him. A sort of instinctive horror mixed itself with the madness of his senses. And then there was a little superstition

## The Romance of a Spahi 93

also of fates and amulets, a fear of, I know not, what enchantments, what dark chains to hold him.

It seemed to him that he was about to step over a fatal threshold, to sign with that, black race a sort of deathly compact, that sombre veils were about to descend between him and his mother and fiancée and all that he had left behind there, regretted and cherished.

A hot twilight fell upon the river. The old white town became rose in its lights and blue in its shadows. Long files of camels went across the plain, taking the north route to the desert. One heard already the tom-tom and the chant that commenced in the distance.

*Anamalis fobil ! Faramata hi !* The hour for Fatou had nearly passed. Jean went in haste to meet her at the marsh of Sorr.

*Anamalis fobil ! Faramata hi !* Over their natural bridal an isolated baobab threw its shadow, the yellow sky ex-<sup>o</sup>

## 94 The Romance of a Spahi

tended its immovable vault, gloomy, charged with electricity, with earthly emanations, with vital things. It would be necessary in order to paint in prose these nocturnal nuptials to take burning colours, African words, sounds, and above all silence, the scents of Senegal, the storm, the transparence, and the obscurity. *Anamalis fobil ! Faramata hi !*

## SECOND PART

### I

THREE years had passed. Three times had there returned the terrible spring and the winter, three times the Season of Thirst with the cold nights and the wind of the desert. . . . Jean slept upon his tara, or couch, in his lodging in the house of Samba-Hamet, his dog near him. And Fatou was at Jean's feet on the floor.

Midday, the silent hour of the siesta. It was hot, hot, strangely hot. Remember our crushing middays of July and imagine yet more heat and more light. It was a day in December. The wind of the desert blew quite softly with its daily regularity, and all was dried up and dead. And upon this sand the wind'



## 96 The Romance of a Spahi

traced an infinite number of little undulating stripes.

. . . . .

Fatou was lying down, supported by her elbows. She had bared herself to the waist—the indoor style—and her polished back showed a graceful curve from the hips to her head.

Around the house of Samba-Hamet there was silence save for the slight movements of the sands or the lizards. And, her chin reposing in her two hands, Fatou half sleepily sang quite low. She sang airs that she had never heard, but had not composed. Her enervated reverie translated itself into sounds somnolent and strange. Reflex action, perhaps.

Oh, in such a midday in the half-sleep of the feverish siesta, how there vibrates and sobs a vague song resulting from 'things as they are'—a sort of paraphrase of silence, heat, solitude, and exile.

. . . . .

Between Jean and Fatou peace is made,

## The Romance of a Spahi 97

Jean has pardoned as ever. The episode of the khâliss and the gold ornaments is finished. The money is found somehow and sent to France. Nyaor lent it. Jean worried about this. But his dear old people would get it and be tranquil.

The rest was trifling. Asleep upon his couch, his slave at his feet, Jean has a superb ease, a false air of an Arab prince. No more does he look the mountaineer of the Cévennes. He has some of the majesty of the sons of the tent.

These three years in Senegal that have cut here and there into the ranks of the spahis have spared him. He is browned, but his forces have grown, his features accentuated. A sort of moral sleep, periods of indifference and of forgetfulness, a sort of heart sleep with sudden shocks of spiritual suffering—that is what the three years brought. The climate of Senegal had not taken any other hold upon his powerful nature.

He became, little by little, a model soldier, punctual, vigilant, and brave. And yet he had but modest stripes of

## 98 The Romance of a Spahi

wool on his arm. The golden stripes of 'Maréchal des Logis' had been refused. He had no protector, and he lived with a black woman !

To get drunk and report oneself with a broken head, to stop the night in the streets overcome, and give blows of the sabre to passers, to go to all the lewd taverns and use all their attractions, all that is very well. But to take, for one's own self only, and to turn from the path of virtue, a little captive from a good house, a captive who had been baptised—behold something that could not be admitted. Upon this particular subject Jean had had from his chiefs violent reproofs, menaces, etc.

Before this storm he had uncovered his proud head, and then he had heard with a stoic calm, born of discipline, dissimulating under a certain air of contrition the mad desire to strike out at some one. After, he had taken no notice and had kept Fatou. That which passed in his heart on the subject of this little creature was so complicated, that

## The Romance of a Spahi 99

cleverer men than he would have been puzzled. He gave himself up to her as though bewitched and could not leave her.

The veils darkened little by little between him and his past, veil upon veil behind. He let himself go without resistance where his troubled heart led him, undecided, 'off the track,' a wanderer from the fold through separation and exile.

And every day that terrible sun !

. . . . . :

For two years Jean and Fatou lived together in the house of Samba-Hamet. At the spahi quarters they had finished talking to him. He was an exemplary, but it was now quite understood that he would get no more promotion. Fatou in the house of Cora was a 'captive' and not a slave, an essential distinction established by the rules of the colony. 'Captive,' she had the right to go, and she used the right. Besides, she was baptised, another point gained, and she knew

## 100 The Romance of a Spahi

all this. For a woman who has not forsworn the religion of Maghreb, to give herself to a white man is 'a shameful action'; but for Fatou this shame did not exist. It is true that her equals sometimes called her Keffir. When she saw arrive from the interior the bands of Khassonkés, whom she recognised from afar by their high head-dress, she ran towards them, seeking to talk to them in the language of her race. Negroes love their birthplace. And sometimes, upon a word being passed, they would say with contempt Keffir (infidel), which is the Roumi of the Algerians or the Giaour of Orientals.

. . . . .

Poor Jean, sleep well upon your tara, may this repose of the day, this slumber heavy and dreamless, be prolonged, for the awakening is sombre !

Oh that awakening after the torpor of slumber at midday ! From whence came that strange lucidity which made of that instant a horror ? Ideas awoke,

## The Romance of a Spahi 101

sad, confused at first, shadowy conceptions, full of mystery as of traces of an earlier existence. Then, all at once, conceptions more clear, souvenirs most radiant of the older days, impressions of infancy, the Cévennes mixing with Africa, anguish of separation, happiness lost. A synthesis rapid, distressing, of all existence. . . . In these moments he seemed to grasp the rapid flight of time, which, as a rule, he did not in his normal state. He awoke hearing the feeble noise of the beating of the arteries of his forehead and he seemed to hear the pulsations of Time, the beatings of a great mysterious Clock of Eternity. He felt Time fly with the quickness of a thing falling through the void, and life running from him without his being able to hold it. . . .

Fatou comprehended vaguely that this awakening period was a dangerous instant and a critical one, in which the white man might escape her. When she saw Jean

## 102 The Romance of a Spahi

open his eyes, so melancholy, and then sit up all at once with an astonished gaze, she quickly approached him and knelt to serve him, or sometimes she passed around his throat her supple arms.

"What is it, my White. One?" she would say in a voice that she made sweet and languishingly like the sound of a guitar.

But these impressions of Jean were not of long duration. When he was wholly awake his habitual atony, debility, resumed its sway and he recommenced to see things under their accustomed aspects.

### II

It was a very important operation, and very complicated, the dressing of the hair of Fatou. This took place once every week and took up a day. In the morning she took the road for Guet-n'dar, the negro town, where there lived in a pointed house the *coiffeuse*, renowned among

## The Romance of a Spahi 103

Nubian dames. She was there hours sitting under the hands of this patient, careful artist in hair.

The *coiffeuse* undid her hair first, unstrung its pearls, cleared its tangles, then reconstructed the edifice. The next day there was thrown over all, in the Khassonké style, a sort of gauze. This head-dress once done lasted for a week. Fatou clothed her feet in elegant little sandals of leather like antique cothurni. She wore a scanty, clinging garment that the Egyptians of the Pharaohs bequeathed to the Nubians.

Above that the boubou, a big square of muslin having a hole through which to pass the head and falling like a Greek peplum to below the knee. She wore heavy rings of silver and odorous necklaces of soumaré, little grains threaded. These grow on the shores of the Gambia and ripen there. They have a pungent perfume, sole of its kind, one of the most characteristic odours of all Senegal. She was very pretty was Fatou, with that high head-dress which gave her the look



## 104 The Romance of a Spahi

of a Hindu divinity. She had nothing of the usual negroid type. She was of the Khassonké type, quite pure; a little nose straight and fine, with fine nostrils, a mouth correct and graceful, with admirable teeth, and, then, above all, the big eyes of bluish enamel, full at times with strange gravity or sometimes lit with mysterious malice.

### III

FATOU never worked. It was a true odalisque that Jean found in her.

She knew what to do in the way of cleaning and repairing her clothing, for she was always as proper as possible in appearance—like a little black cat dressed in white. This was by an instinct of propriety in the first place, and then also because she had grasped the fact that Jean could not put up with her unless she did so. But beyond the care of her own person she was incapable of any

## The Romance of a Spahi 105

work. From the time that the poor old Peyfals could no longer send to their son their own little economical savings that bit by bit they put aside for him, the budget of Fatou had become very difficult to balance.

Happily, Fatou was a sober-living little person. The actual cost of her maintenance was not dear.

In all the lands of the Soudan the woman is placed—in comparison with the man—in a condition of very great inferiority. Several times in the course of her life she is bought and sold, as a beast might be, at a price which diminishes as she grows older or uglier.

Jean asked one day of his friend Nyaor, “What have you done with Nokhoudour Khoullé—your wife—she who was so beautiful?”

And Nyaor responded with a tranquil smile, “She was too impertinent. I sold her and bought thirty sheep, *who do not talk.*”

It is to the woman that there always

## 106 The Romance of a Spahi

comes the hardest native work, that of preparing the kouss-kouss, for instance. From morning to night in all Nubia, from Timbuctoo to the coast of 'Guinea, in all villages, under the devouring sun, the pestles of wood are used by the negress to beat the grain. The result is a kind of ground millet, out of which is made kouss-kouss—basis of food for these blacks. Fatou escaped this ancient toil. Each evening she visited Couran'diaye, old poetess of King El Hadj. She was a woman bard. There, by means of a slight monthly fee, she had the right of sitting among the little slaves of the old favourite of a king, and around great calabashes of hot kouss-kouss, and to eat her fill.

From the tara, stretched on fine mats, the old decayed one presided with dignity.

Nevertheless, they were scenes that were glowing and unusual, these 'repasts'; the young girls nude, seated upon the floor in a circle around the enormous calabashes, fishing into them with their fingers. There were cries,

## The Romance of a Spahi 107

grimaces, and pranks that would beat any monkey tricks.

Fatou was always dressed and clean when Jean returned. Then, beneath her idol's head-dress, she looked serious; not the same creature.

It was dull at night, this dead quarter shut away at the end of a dead-and-alive town. Jean had rested often on his elbows at the big window of his bare white chamber. The sea-breeze shook the priest's parchments Fatou had hung there to protect their sleep. Before him he had the great horizons of Senegal, the point of Barbary, a flat immensity on the far-off distances of which weighed the heavy vapours of the twilight—the entry to the Desert.

Sometimes he sat at the gate of the house of Samba-Hamet, near where were some old buildings of brick, in ruins, and a yellow palm tree, the sole one of that quarter. He sat and smoked cigarettes that he had taught Fatou to make.

*Hélas!* This distraction he had to

## 108 The Romance of a Spahi

think of stopping soon for want of money. He sat, and followed with his big brown eyes the come and go of two or three little negresses, who chased about madly in the twilight and the evening wind. In December the setting of the sun brings almost always to Saint Louis fresh breezes and great curtains of clouds that darken the sky but do not burst. They pass high and pass away. Never a drop of rain, never an impression of humidity ; it is the dry season, and in all Nature around one cannot find an atom of moisture. There is air to breathe, however, these December nights. It is a respite, this penetrating freshness, and it causes a sensation of relief to the body, but, at the same time, I know not what impression of melancholy.

And when Jean was seated at night before his door his thoughts went afar. The travel his eyes often made over maps at the barracks he often also made in the spirit, at night as a rule, a sort of panorama that the mind's eye unrolled of ' the World without.'

## The Romance of a Spahi 109

Firstly one must traverse the big, sombre desert behind the house. This first part of the journey his spirit accomplished slowest, loitering in an infinitude of mysterious solitudes of sand. And then, to get clear of Algeria and the Mediterranean, to arrive at the coasts of France, the valley of the Rhone, then at last the Cévennes. Mountains! It was so long since his eyes had been lifted up to mountains, so long that he had almost lost the knowledge of what mountains were like, he who had looked day after day out upon the flat desert solitudes of Senegal. And then the forests! The great woods full of chestnuts in the Cévennes, humid and full of shadow, where ran true brooks and streams of living water, where the soil had the odour of *real earth* with carpets of freshness and fine herbs. He felt it would charm him, ease him, if he could but see a little humid earth and moss in place of sand, wind, and sun. And his dear village, that in his ideal voyage he saw from on high, as he planed over it, the old church, the

## 110 The Romance of a Spahi

clock perhaps sounding the Angelus of the Evening, his own home bluish with vapour, by a night of December, very cold, and a pale ray of the moon silvering all. Was it possible, at that very instant, all existed at home as he pictured ?

. . . . .

What were his parents doing, sitting before the fire of wood gathered outside ? He saw the evening lamp, the old furniture, the cat asleep.

Seven o'clock ! The repast over, they were before the fire just as of yore.

And Jeanne was with them, perhaps. She often was, his mother said. How was she now ? ' Changed and yet more lovely ' they had written to him—and that figure of hers, that figure of a grand young woman that he had not yet seen ?

. . . . .

Near the handsome spahi sat Fatou with the high coiffure. Night had now wholly come, and upon the solitary Place children still played, passing and chasing each other in the obscurity. One was

## The Romance of a Spahi 111

without clothes, the others had long flying robes, and they seemed in the twilight like big white bats. The cold wind excited them and made them run.

### IV

AT certain epochs, before the house of Samba-Hamet, there were held fantastic bamboulas, or dance festivals. On these occasions Coura-n'diaye lent to Fatou some of her precious jewels to go to the fête in.

Sometimes she appeared there herself, as in the days of yore.

Then there was great admiration when the old singer advanced, covered with gold ornaments, head erect, eyes shining, upon her nude breast the marvellous presents of El Hadj the Conqueror. She sang, and one caught a reflection in her chant of the older days, of great, mysterious wars in the interior ; the armies of El Hadj flying, whole races left to the



## 112 The Romance of a Spahi

vultures, the assault of Segou-Kkoro, all the villages of Massina for hundreds of leagues burning to the sun, from Medina to Timbuctoo.

Coura-n'diaye was very fatigued when she finished, and when undressed slept or rested for two days.

### V

GUET-N'DAR, the negro town, was built of straw huts. In the middle of it was a large street of sand. On each side of this vast cutting was a maze of little twisting streets.

In these quarters Fatou conducted Jean, holding him by the finger.

It is January, seven in the morning, and fresh, even for Senegal.

Jean walks gravely. He smiles inwardly at the place and person Fatou takes him to. He feels well and fairly happy.

## The Romance of a Spahi 113

Everything reminds him of his exile. But there is magic in a tropic sunrise, such limpid air : Jean smiles at Fatou—and forgets.

Jean and Fatou were going to see a grand old fellow called Samba-Latir. Fatou explained to him that an ugly old woman had tried to bewitch her. Fatou had no amulet against her evil eye !

### VI

Now this one thing that was lacking was a speciality of great repute, that Samba-Latir knew of and provided, and therefore behold why Fatou had come to him and had recourse to his great knowledge.

This was to cost only two khâliss of silver—say ten francs—and the spahi, who did not know a bit how to bargain, not even for an amulet, paid out the money without a murmur. Nevertheless, he felt the blood mount to his

## 114 The Romance of a Spahi

temples in seeing his money depart, not that he held on to money as a rule or was mean, for never had he been able to grasp the actual spending-power of coins ; but nevertheless, two khâliss of silver was a lot at present for his poor spahi purse. And, above all, he told himself with a feeling of remorse, and pain at the heart, that his old parents deprived themselves, no doubt, of many things that he might have that two khâliss to spend. They had deprived themselves of many things more useful than the amulets of Fatou.

### VII

THE following is a letter from Jeanne Méry to her cousin, Jean Peyral, at Senegal :

“ MY DEAR JEAN,

“ Do you know that three years have passed since your departure, and

## The Romance of a Spahi 115

I wait always for you to tell me of your return to us. I have great faith in you, do you see, and I know you would not deceive me. But that does not stop me saying that I find the time go, and the waiting is hard. In the night misery holds me, and all sorts of ideas come to me. Then my parents say that if you had wished you could have spent some leave with me. It is true our cousin Pierre has returned twice here during the time of his soldiering. There are those who spread abroad the idea that I am to espouse the big Sairot. But do you believe that? I know that there is no one in the world for me like my dear Jean. You may rest very tranquil, there is no danger that I shall be trapped. It is all one to me what they say. I shall think again and again of my dear Jean, who is worth more than all the others, and I shall not weary then. Thanks for your portrait. You ; but they say here you have changed. I find you the same as you were, only that you do not look at the world quite in the same manner. It

## 116 The Romance of a Spahi

is on the big chimney ; when I enter it is the first thing that I regard. I have not yet dared wear the beautiful bracelet made by negroes you sent, for fear of Olivette and Rose. Already they think I play the young lady ! ,

“ When we are married it will be different. Do but come. I languish for a sight of you. Often I want to laugh with the others, then I want to hide and cry.

“ Adieu, my dear Jean. I embrace you with all my heart.

“ JEANNE MÉRY.”

### VIII

FATOU's hands were black outside, rose within. They reminded Jean of little monkey's paws ! But they were delicate, and she had fine wrists and round arms ; but the rose palms had something about them *not human*. That and certain notes of her voice when

## The Romance of a Spahi 117

excited, certain poses and gestures. In the end, though, Jean ceased to think of them. He even called her sometimes Little Monkey Girl, to her disdain.

One fine day Fritz Muller called and surprised Jean making a close inspection of Fatou, and calling her a monkey.

Fatou was vexed. "Ah, Jean. Don't say that, my White One. Monkeys, too, can't talk. I can, well!"

Fritz departed with a laugh, and Jean also.

"A very pretty little monkey, anyhow!" said Fritz, who greatly admired the beauty of Fatou.

## IX

A WHITE saloon, all open to the wind of the night. Two lamps suspended; a table of men in red, black waiters; a grand supper of the spahis. It had been a fête day at Saint Louis, military fête, review, races on camels, etc. All

## 118 The Romance of a Spahi

the usual programme of a provincial fête plus the strange note given it by a Nubian scene. Through the streets people had seen circulate in uniform all the garrison who were well. And the spahis, who have by order paraded all the day, on Government Place, are very excited. Medals and promotions had come from France by the last courier. There were many toasts, songs, and jests. One spahi gave this toast, "To those who have fallen at Mecké and at Bobdiarah." And the glasses were emptied to their memory. But this strange toast threw a damper over all.

Jean, who had laughed with the happiest, became grave too. . . .

It was to fight he became spahi, not to languish under the spells of a girl of the Khassonék !

. . . . .

Poor fellows, who drink to the memory of the dead ; laugh, sing, be very gay and very mad if you like. Profit by the joyous instant that passes ; but the

## The Romance of a Spahi 119

songs and the shouts sound false on this earth of Senegal, and there are places marked there in the sand for some of you to dwell in for ever.

### X

“ IN Galam ! ” Who can understand the mysterious echoes these words can awaken in the depths of the soul of the exiled negro !

The first time Jean had inquired of Fatou (it was some time before in her mistress's house), “ Where is your home, little one ? ” Fatou had answered in a voice trembling with emotion : “ From the land of Galam.”

Poor negroes, of the Soudan, they are exiled, driven from their native villages by great wars or terrible famines, by all the mighty devastations which fall upon such primitive lands ! They are sold, taken into captivity, and sometimes they traverse on foot, under their mas-



## 120 The Romance of a Spahi

ter's whip, tracts of land broader than the whole of Europe ; but deep down in their black hearts the picture of their home remains ineffaceably graven.

Sometimes it is far-away Timbuctoo, or Segou-Koro, reflecting in the Niger its mighty palaces of white clay ; or else a poor little thatched village, somewhere lost in the desert, or hidden away in an unexplored undulation in the mountains of the south—which has been converted by the passage of the conqueror into a heap of ashes and a charnel-house for the vultures.

“ In Galam ! ” She repeated the words in contemplative and mysterious fashion.

“ To Galam,” Fatou said, “ I will one day take you, Jean.”

Ancient and sacred land of Galam, which Fatou recalled when she shut her eyes. Country of Galam ! land of gold and ivory, where, in its tepid waters, sleep the grey crocodiles in the shade of the lofty mangroves, where the elephant, traversing the depths of the forest,

## The Romance of a Spahi 121

rapidly strikes the earth with his heavy tread ! .

Jean had dreamed before of this land of Galam. Fatou had told him very strange stories, which had excited his imagination, susceptible as it was to the influence of the new and strange. Now that feeling had departed ; his curiosity about Africa had dulled and waned ; he preferred to drag out a monotonous existence at Saint Louis, and be there ready for the happy moment of his return to the Cèvennes.

But if he went still further, to Fatou's home, he would be far from the sea, which even here retained some of its coolness, sent out refreshing breezes, and remained the only means of communication with the rest of the world. To go to Galam, where the air would be even warmer and heavier, would be to bury himself in the suffocating interior. No, he could no longer entertain such an idea ; now he would refuse if the suggestion were made to him to go and explore Galam. He dreamed of his own land,

## 122 The Romance of a Spahi

its mountains and cool rivers. The thought alone of Fatou's home made him feel hotter and gave him a headache.

### XI

FATOU could not see a hippopotamus without running the risk of dropping dead ; it was the result of a spell cast upon her family long ago by a native sorcerer ; every means had been tried to break it. There had been among her relatives numerous examples of people who had dropped dead at the mere sight of these big beasts, and the curse had pursued the family mercilessly for several generations.

This is, too, a kind of spell very frequent in the Soudan. Some families cannot look at the lion ; others the lamantin ; others—and they are the most unfortunate—the alligator. It is

## The Romance of a Spahi 123

all the greater affliction, because amulets are of no avail against it.

One can imagine the precautions Fatou's ancestors were compelled to take : how they were compelled to refrain from traversing the country at the time the hippopotamus loved to be abroad, and in particular from approaching the great leafy swamps where these huge animals delight to gambol.

As for Fatou, on discovering that in a certain house in Saint Louis lived a young tame hippopotamus, she always made a tremendous détour to avoid the neighbourhood, for fear of giving way to the longing she felt to go and look at the animal, of which every day she obtained minute descriptions from her friends ; a feeling of curiosity which one can well understand had some witchcraft about it.

## 124 The Romance of a Spahi

### XII

THE time passed slowly in its monotonous heat: every day was just like every other day—the spahis performed their regular duties, the same sun shone down upon the white walls, the same silence was over all. There were rumours of war against Boubakar-Segen, son of El Hadj, which afforded conversation for the troopers, but came to naught. Nothing ever happened in this dead city, and the news from distant Europe seemed to be stifled by the heat.

Jean passed through different moral phases: he went from one extremity to the other; usually he only felt a vague boredom, a weariness of everything; and then, from time to time, the country's malady, which seemed asleep in his heart, reawakened to make him suffer.

The winter season was approaching: the sea-breezes had died away, and on some days there seemed no air to breathe, when the tepid sea was smooth and

## The Romance of a Spahi 125

shining like oil, while it reflected as an immense mirror the powerful torrid light.

Did Jean love Fatou ?

The poor spahi hardly knew himself. He looked upon her, moreover, as an inferior creature ; he scarcely took the trouble to discover what there was in the depths of her little black soul. .

Little Fatou was crafty and untruthful, with an incredible share of malice and perverseness ; Jean had long ago found that out. But he was also aware of the absolute devotion she had for him, the devotion of a dog for its master, the negro's adoration for his fetish ; and without knowing positively what degree of heroism this sentiment was capable of attaining, he was touched and affected by it.

Sometimes his great pride reawakened, his " white-man " dignity revolted. The troth he had plighted to his fiancée, and broken for a little black girl, rose up before his honourable conscience ; he was ashamed of being so weak. \

But Fatou had become very beautiful. \

## 126 The Romance of a Spahi

When lissome and upright she walked with that swing of the hip which African women seem to have borrowed from the big felines of their land ; when she passed with her white muslin drapery thrown like a peplum over her breast and curved shoulders, she was an example of antique perfection ; when she slept with her arms raised above her head, she had the gracefulness of a carving. Beneath her lofty amber coiffure, her fine and regular features assumed at times the mysterious beauty of an idol of polished ebony ; her big blue eyes half closed, her dark smile, slowly displaying her white teeth, possessed a negro grace, a sensual charm, a power of material seduction, something indefinable, which seemed to be at the same time a combination of the monkey, young virgin, and tigress—and made a strange fire course through the blood in the spahi's veins.

Jean had a sort of superstitious horror of all her amulets ; there were times when the profusion of ornaments wearied and angered him. He did not believe

## The Romance of a Spahi 127

in them, certainly ; but seeing these black amulets everywhere and knowing that almost all of them were supposed to possess the virtue of ensnaring and retaining him, seeing upon the ceiling and walls, finding hidden beneath the mats, strangely shaped little figures—waking in the morning to find them gently placed upon his breast . . . it seemed to him that around him in the air were being woven invisible and uncanny bonds.

Then, too, money was running short. Decidedly, he told himself, he must get rid of Fatou. He would spend his last two years in obtaining his stripes ; he would send to his aged parents a small sum to make their lives more enjoyable ; and he would still be able to save enough to bring Jeanne Méry her wedding gifts and make a proper contribution to the cost of their wedding.

But was it the power of the amulets, or force of habit, or inertia of will produced by the heaviness of the atmosphere ? Fatou continued to keep her



## 128 The Romance of a Spahi

little hand upon him, and he did not get rid of her.

He often thought of his fiancée. If he had been obliged to give her up, it seemed to him that his life would have been ruined. There was something like a radiance around her in his memory. He supplied with a halo that fine girl who his mother mentioned in her letters was getting more beautiful every day. He tried to picture to himself her face as a wife, by developing the features of the child of fifteen he had left. He related to her all his plans for the future and happiness. He knew he possessed a precious thing there, far away, awaiting him at the fireside. Her picture in the past was already somewhat dim—still a little further in the future, and he would lose sight of her altogether at times.

How he loved his old parents too! He had very deep filial affection for his father—a veneration which was almost a cult.

But perhaps the tenderest spot of all in his heart was for his mother.

## The Romance of a Spahi 129

In the case of sailors, spahis—all those outcasts, all those young fellows who spend their lives upon the mighty sea or in a land of exile, in the midst of the roughest and most abnormal rules of existence ; even in the case of the worst of good-for-nothings, the wildest, most careless and unruly of them all—look into the darkest and most secret corner in their hearts : often you will find an old mother seated in that sanctuary—an old peasant woman, from it matters not where—a Basque with her woollen shawl, or a good, kind Breton woman with her white head-dress.

### XIII

FOR the fourth time the winter season had come.

The days were suffocatingly hot, without a breath of air. The dull and leaden sky was reflected in a sea like oil,

## 130 The Romance of a Spahi

in which several schools of sharks were at play ; and all along the coast of Africa the monotonous line of sand assumed a dazzling whiteness beneath the glare of the sun.

Those are the days when the fish have great encounters.

Suddenly the smooth, shining surface ripples for several hundred metres, splashes and separates into little foaming patches. It is an immense school of fish fleeing at top speed from the voracity of a cluster of sharks.

Those, too, are the days loved by the black boatmen, the days selected for long or rapid journeys.

On such days as those, when it seems to our European organs that the heavy air is no longer breathable, that life is escaping from us, and that movement is becoming impossible, if you go to sleep in a boat upon the river in the shade of a moistened awning, often in the midst of your painful midday siesta you will be awakened by the shouts and whistling of boatmen, and by a great noise of running

## The Romance of a Spahi 131

water, feverishly beaten by paddle strokes. It is a fleet of canoes passing in a strenuous race beneath the leaden sun.

The black inhabitants, too, are there, being awakened by the noise and trooping down to the bank. The spectators urge on the racers with a mighty din, and just as with us, the winners are received with clapping and the losers with jeers.

### XIV

JEAN only appeared in the spahis' quarters just as long as his military duties necessitated ; while his comrades often took his place. His officers shut their eyes to this arrangement, which allowed him to spend almost his whole time in his own particular retreat.

Now everybody liked him, attracted by the charm of intelligence and honour which emanated from him ; his handsome face and his voice, which had gradually and unconsciously taken effect

## 132 The Romance of a Spahi

on those brought into contact with him. Jean had ended, in spite of everything, by gaining confidence and esteem, by creating a sort of position apart, which gave him almost entire freedom and liberty of action ; he had found a means of being a punctual and correct soldier, while at the same time being almost a free man.

### XV

ONE evening the bugle sounding the recall brought him back. The old quarters no longer presented their usual listless appearance. In the courtyard groups were talking eagerly ; some of the spahis were ascending and descending the stairs four at a time, as if under the influence of mad joy. It was obvious that there was something fresh in the wind.

“ Grand news for you, Peyral ! ” called out Muller the Alsatian ; “ you go to-

## The Romance of a Spahi 133

morrow, you start for Algiers, lucky fellow that you are ! ”

Twelve new spahis had arrived from France by the boat from Dakar ; a dozen of the senior men were to leave—Jean was one of them—and as a favour finish their service in Algeria.

They started the following evening for Dakar.

At Dakar they were to take the French mail-boat to Bordeaux ; thence they would reach Marseilles by the Southern Railway, with halts upon the way, allowing them to make a *détour* and visit their homes—those who had any ; then at Marseilles they were to take the mail-boat to Algiers—the land of plenty to the spahis—and the last period of their service would pass like a dream !

### XVI

JEAN returned home along the dreary banks of the river. The starry night had fallen upon the Senegal, astonishing in its

## 134 The Romance of a Spahi

calm and luminous transparency. There were little sounds made by the stream in the river, and, deadened by distance, the drum, the *anamalis fobil* of spring, which he was listening to in the same place for the fourth time, and which brought to his mind the memories of his first enervating pleasures in the land of the blacks, was now saluting his departure.

The moon's slender crescent, the great stars which gleamed quite low and close to the flat horizon in the luminous vapour, and fires lighted upon the opposite bank in the negro village of Sorr, all traced upon the tepid water vague trails of light ; there was heat in the air, and concealed beneath the water, and phosphorescence everywhere. Nature had her atmosphere saturated with heat and phosphorus ; a calm full of mystery, a condition of tranquil melancholy, had settled down upon the banks of the Senegal.

This grand, unexpected news was quite true ! He had found out that it was quite accurate ; his name was on the list

## The Romance of a Spahi 135

of those who were to go ; the following evening he would be on his way down this river, never to return.

That night there was nothing to be done in preparation for his departure ; in quarters the offices were closed, everybody was out of doors ; preparations for the voyage must be left till the morrow ; the only thing to do that evening was to think, to collect his ideas, to give way to all sorts of dreams, and to say good-bye to everything in this land of exile.

In his head was a great confusion of thoughts and incoherent impressions. In a month, perhaps, he would be making a fleeting appearance in his native village, to embrace as he passed his beloved parents and find Jeanne transformed into a great, serious girl ; he would see it all on his way, as in a dream ! That was the dominating idea which returned to him time after time, and on every occasion making a great commotion in his heart and causing it to beat more quickly.

Still he was not prepared for that meeting ; all sorts of painful reflections



## 136 The Romance of a Spahi

were mingled with his great and unexpected joy.

What a figure he would cut, reappearing after three years without even having gained the modest distinction of his sergeant's stripes, with nothing brought back for any of his friends from his long voyage, bare as a tramp, without money or baggage ; without even having time to obtain new and suitable attire in which to make his entry into the village. No, really, this departure was too sudden, it intoxicated him, he ought to have been allowed a few days for preparation.

Besides, he did not know Algeria, nor did it attract him. He would have to become acclimatised elsewhere ! Since he was obliged to complete those years subtracted from his existence far from his native land, he might as well do so here upon the banks of this great, melancholy river, the sadness of which was now familiar to him.

Alas ! he loved his Senegal, poor wretch : he saw it clearly now ; he was bound to it by a number of mysterious

## The Romance of a Spahi 137

inner ties. He was nearly mad with joy at the thought of his return ; but still he clung to this sandy land, to its great, mournful sadness, to the house of Samba-Hamet, and even to the extremes of heat and light.

He was not prepared to depart so quickly.

Odours from everything around him had bit by bit percolated into the blood of his veins ; he felt himself held back, fastened by all kinds of invisible threads, dark fetters and black amulets.

Ideas at last became jumbled in his troubled head ; his unexpected deliverance frightened him. In the oppression of that warm night, which seemed to be full of the emanations of a storm, strange and mysterious influences were struggling around him ; it seemed as if the powers of sleep and death were in deadly combat with those of awakening and life.

## 138 The Romance of a Spahi

### XVII

SOLDIERS' departures are at short notice. The next evening, all his baggage being hastily packed and his papers in order, Jean was leaning upon the nettings of a steamer going down the river. As he smoked his cigarette he was watching Saint Louis fade away in the distance.

Fatou was crouching near him on the deck. With all her waist-cloths and charms hastily made up into four large packages, she was ready at the appointed time. Jean had to pay her passage as far as Dakar with the remains of his pay. He did it willingly, happily, to gratify her last wish, and also to keep her with him a little longer. The tears she shed, the "widow's cries" she uttered, according to the custom of her country, were all sincere and heart-rending. Jean was touched to the bottom of his heart by her despair; he forgot she was vicious, untruthful, and black.

## The Romance of a Spahi 139

As his heart opened to the joy of his return, his pity for Fatou increased, and even a little love became mingled with it. He was taking her as far as Dakar ; that was time gained, to reflect upon what he could do with her.

### XVIII

DAKAR is a sort of colonial town, rough-cast upon sand and red rocks. It is a port of call improvised for mail-boats at the western extremity of Africa, called Cape Verd. Large baobabs grow here and there upon its desolate dunes. Flocks of eagles and vultures hover above the place.

Fatou was temporarily installed in a mulatto's hut. She had declared she never wished to see Saint Louis again, that was the extent of her plans ; she did not know what would become of her—nor did Jean. Jean had searched far and wide and found nothing, thought

## 140 The Romance of a Spahi

of nothing for her and his money was exhausted.

It was morning—the mail-boat which was to convey the spahis must start in a few hours. Fatou was crouching near the four packages which contained her wealth, saying no word, not even answering questions, with her eyes fixed and staring in a sort of sad and stupid despair, which was so deep and real that it rent the heart.

Jean was standing near her, twisting his moustache and quite at a loss.

The door opened suddenly, and a big spahi entered like the wind, with anxious and disturbed manner and eager look in his eyes.

He was Pierre Boyer, for two years at Saint Louis Jean's comrade and roommate. They hardly spoke, both being very reserved, but they esteemed one another, and when Boyer started for duty at Gorée they had cordially shaken hands.

Taking off his cap, Pierre Boyer made a rapid excuse for coming in like a mad-

## The Romance of a Spahi 141

man, and then effusively took Jean's hands.

"Oh, Peyral!" he said, "I have been looking for you since before daybreak! Listen to me for a moment, let us talk. I have a great favour to ask of you.

"First of all, listen to all I have to tell you, and do not hurry to answer me.

"You are going to Algeria. Alas! to-morrow I start for the post of Gadiangué in Ouankarah, with a few other fellows from Gorée. There is fighting in that neighbourhood; nearly three months will be spent there, and without a doubt there will be promotion to be gained or the medal.

"We have both of us the same time to serve, we are of the same age. It would not alter your return in any way. Peyral, will you change with me?"

Jean had guessed and understood from the first words he uttered what his request would be. His eyes opened wide, staring into space as if dilated by his mental torment. A tumultuous wave of thoughts, indecisions, and contradictions

## 142 The Romance of a Spahi

mounted to his brain ; he stood with his arms crossed, lost in thought ; his forehead bent towards the ground, and Fatou, who had also understood, got up, breathless, waiting for the decision to come from Jean's lips. •

Then the other spahi went on, speaking volubly, as if to prevent Jean from uttering the " no " he was trembling at the thought of hearing.

" Listen, Peyral, it will be a good stroke of business for you, I assure you."

" The others, Boyer ? Have you asked the others ? "

" Yes, they have refused. But I knew them ; they have reasons ! You would be doing a good stroke of business, Peyral. The Governor of Gorée is interested in me ; he promises you his protection if you accept. We thought of you first of all " (looking at Fatou), " because it is well known you like the country. On your return from Gadiangué you will be sent to finish your time at Saint Louis, that is arranged with the Governor ; it is all settled, I swear."

## The Romance of a Spahi 143

"But we shall never have the time," Jean interrupted, feeling himself lost, and wishing to try and cling to an impossibility.

"Yes," Pierre Boyer said, a gleam of joy already beginning to appear in his eyes. "We shall have time, Peyral, we have all the afternoon before us. You will have nothing to do. Everything is arranged with the Governor, the papers are ready. Your consent only and your signature there, and I start back to Gorée; I shall return in two hours, and everything will be completed. Listen, Peyral. Here are my savings, three hundred francs—they are yours. It will help you, on your return to Saint Louis, to set up house again—it will be useful for something."

"Oh, thanks!" Jean replied, "I do not accept payment!"

He turned his head in disdain, and Boyer, who realised he had made a false step, took his hand, saying, "Don't get angry, Peyral!" He kept Jean's hand in his own, and they both stood



## 144 The Romance of a Spahi

there facing one another, anxious and silent.

Fatou had realised that she could spoil everything by uttering a word. Therefore, she had sunk down on her knees, muttering a negro's prayer, enlacing with her arms the spahi's legs, and being dragged along by him.

Jean, who was annoyed at such a scene before the other man, said roughly to her :

“ Come, Fatou, let go of me, please. Have you suddenly gone mad ? ”

But Pierre Boyer did not think them ridiculous ; on the contrary, he was moved.

A ray of the morning sun on its path to the yellow sand came in through the door opening, and lit up the red uniforms of the two spahis—revealing their fine, powerful faces now haggard with anxiety and indecision, making the silver rings gleam upon Fatou's supple arms, which she had wound like snakes about Jean's knees, revealing the melancholy bareness of that African hut of wood and thatch

## The Romance of a Spahi 145

in which these three young and lonely creatures were about to decide their destinies.

"Peyral," the other spahi went on in a low, quiet voice, "Peyral, you see it is because I am an Algerian. You know that is true. There at Blidah my dear old parents are waiting for me; they have no one but me. You know very well what the feeling is to return home once more."

"Yes!" Jean said, pushing his red cap to the back of his head and stamping his foot. "Very well, I agree. I will exchange and stay in your place."

Boyer clasped him in his arms and kissed him. Fatou, still upon the ground, uttered a cry of triumph, and then hid her face against Jean's knees, with a sort of savage sound, ending in a peal of nervous laughter, followed by sobs.

## 146 The Romance of a Spahi

### XIX

THERE was need for haste. Pierre Boyer departed as he had come, like a madman, carrying off to Gorée the precious paper bearing poor Jean's clumsy soldier's signature, which was all the same very correct and readable.

At the last moment everything was in order and countersigned ; the baggage had been transhipped, the exchange was complete ; it had all been settled so quickly that the two spahis had hardly found time to think.

At three o'clock exactly the mail-boat took her departure, bearing Pierre Boyer. Jean stayed behind.

### XX

BUT when it was over and irrevocable, when Jean found himself upon the sand watching the departing vessel, a feeling of mad despair entered his mind ; his

## The Romance of a Spahi 147

heart was torn with an anguish, in which was mingled a feeling of terror at what he had just done, of rage against Fatou, of horror at the black girl's presence, and something like a desire to drive her away from him—the whole comprising a profound feeling of immense love reawakened for his old home, for the dear ones waiting there, whom he would not now see.

It seemed to him that he had just signed a sort of death-contract with this dreary land, and that his life was ended. He began to run over the dunes without knowing where he was going, in order to breathe the air, to be alone to follow with his eyes as long as possible the disappearing vessel.

The sun was still high and blazing fiercely when he started, and those desert plains in its brilliant light had a striking and majestic appearance. For a long while he traversed the wild shore upon the crest of the sand-hills or the top of the red cliffs, to obtain a wider view. A strong wind was blowing about him, and lashing at his feet the vast ocean,

## 148 The Romance of a Spahi

upon which the receding vessel was still visible.

He did not feel the heat of the sun, so distracted was he.

Parted for two mere years from that country, when he might have been speeding towards it over the sea, on the way to his own beloved native village! What dark influences, O God, what amulets had kept him there!

Two years! Would they ever end? would there ever be a deliverance from his exile?

He ran towards the north in the direction the ship was taking, to keep it in sight. He scratched himself with the prickly shrubs, while into his breast fell a shower of big locusts which he disturbed as he passed through the foliage.

He was far away, alone in the midst of that desolate, silent, and dreary waste near Cape Verd.

He had seen in front of him for some time a huge, isolated tree, larger even than the baobabs, with thick, dark foliage, something so immense that it seemed like

## The Romance of a Spahi 149

one of those giants of the flora of the old world, which had been forgotten there by the centuries.

He sat down exhausted upon the sand beneath its great dome of shade, and dropping his head began to weep.

When he got up again the ship had disappeared, and it was evening.

The evening had come, that period of calmer and cooler melancholy. At this time of dusk the great tree was an absolutely black mass, standing in the midst of an immense African waste.

Before him stretched the calmed and tranquil ocean in its vastness. Below at his feet rose in terraces the shore, with the great Cape Verd as the summit of the monotonous plains intersected by regular ravines without vegetation; it was a far-stretching landscape of the most melancholy character.

Behind him, inland as far as the eye could reach, were the mysterious undulations of low hills, the distant silhouettes of baobabs, like those of madrepores. •

There was not a breath of wind in the

## 150 The Romance of a Spahi

heavy atmosphere. The setting sun had faded into thick mist, its yellow disc strangely distorted and exaggerated by the mirage. Everywhere in the sand, as the evening approached, great white flowers were opening and filling the air with their noxious perfume, till the atmosphere became charged with the deadly fumes of belladonna. Moths hovered about the poisonous blossoms. On every side in the dense foliage the pigeon's plaintive call sounded.

The whole of this part of Africa was covered with a deadly vapour, and the horizon had already become vague and dark.

There behind him was the mysterious interior, of which in the past he used to dream ; now there was nothing as far as Podor, Medina, the district of Galam, or even mysterious Timbuctoo he desired to see.

He felt or realised all these choking sorrows. His thoughts were now elsewhere—the whole of this vast land now frightened him.

## The Romance of a Spahi 151

His only desire now was to free himself from all these nightmares—to go away—to depart at any price.

Big, fierce-looking African herdsmen passed, driving before them towards the villages their little herds of hump-backed oxen.

The mirage of the sun, which the Bible would have called a “sign from heaven,” disappeared slowly like a pale meteor. Night was at hand. Everything became dark in the noxious mist; the silence was profound. Beneath the great tree it was just like being in a temple.

Jean thought of the thatched cottage of his birth at this time on a summer evening, of his old mother, of his sweetheart—and it seemed to him that everything had come to an end; he dreamed that he was dead and would never see them again.



## 52 The Romance of a Spahi

### XXI

His fate was now decided, he must follow out his destiny.

Two days later Jean embarked in his friend's place on a small gunboat to take up his duty at the distant post of Gadiangué or Ouankarah. A few men with stores were going to reinforce this lonely post. In the surrounding territory disturbances had broken out, and caravans could no longer pass in safety; it was one of the negro quarrels, between rapacious tribes and plundering chiefs. It was thought that the winter season would see the end of the fighting and in three or four months on his return, according to the promise made to Boyer by the Governor of Gorée, Jean would be once again sent to Saint Louis, there to end his period of service.

The little boat was crowded. First of all there was Fatou, who had got on board by dint of persistence and cunning, through posing as the wife of a black

## The Romance of a Spahi 153

sharpshooter. She was there, following him with her four calabashes and all her possessions.

There were a dozen spahis from the Gorée garrison, sent to sojourn for a season in this exile. Then besides the boat carried twenty native sharpshooters, who took with them their entire families.

The sharpshooters took with them a curious household. Each one had several wives and children, besides food in calabashes, clothing, and household utensils, also in calabashes; they also had with them heaps of amulets and flocks of domestic animals.

At the start there was a scene of great disorder and obstruction on board. At first sight it seemed as if such a mixture of persons and goods would never be sorted out.

But that was a mistake; for after the voyage had been in progress an hour everything had been collected and fastened in marvellous fashion. The negresses on the journey slept lying on the deck wrapped in their waist-cloths,

## 154 The Romance of a Spahi

as closely packed and quiet as sardines in a box, while the gunboat steamed slowly to the south, bit by bit approaching the warmer and bluer regions.

### XXII

A CALM night was spent upon this equatorial sea.

The silence was absolute, in the midst of which the slightest rustle of clothing was perceptible ; from time to time upon the deck sounded the groans of a negress who was dreaming ; human voices vibrated with terrifying sounds.

A warm torpor was over everything. The atmosphere seemed to contain the stupefying immobility of a world's sleep.

A milky sea full of phosphorus acted as an immense mirror, reflecting the night in its warm transparency.

The boat seemed to be between two mirrors facing endlessly and reflecting one another ; they seemed to be in space :

## The Romance of a Spahi 155

there was no horizon visible. In the distance the two sheets mingled and merged, the sky and the sea, in vague and boundless cosmic depths.

The moon was there, very low in the heavens, like a big ball of fire without rays, suspended in the midst of a world of pale and phosphorescent grey vapours.

In the first ages of geology, before 'the light' was separated from the darkness, the universe must have been in such a state of tranquil expectation. The periods of rest between the creations must have contained periods of this inexpressible stillness; such a stagnation as this must have existed in the epochs when the worlds were not yet condensed, when light was diffuse and undefined in the atmosphere, when the suspended clouds were of uncreated lead and iron, when the whole of the eternal matter was sublimated by the intense heat of the primitive chaos.

## 156 The Romance of a Spahi

### XXIII

THE voyage had lasted for three days ; at sunrise everything was tinged with a brilliant golden hue. •

As it rose on the fourth day, the sun revealed in the east a long green line—first of all of a golden green, then of a tint so unnatural and so green that it was like the colour painted on a Chinese fan.

This line was the coast of Guinea. They reached the mouth of the Diak-hallémé, and the ship with the spahis on board made for the river's broad mouth.

In that part the country was as flat as Senegal, but its character was different : it was the region where the leaves do not fall.

Everywhere was surprising equatorial verdure, always young and of an emerald green, one of the greens our trees never attain, even in the splendour of the month of June.

As far as the eye could see was the

## The Romance of a Spahi 157

same never-ending forest, of a uniform level; reflected in the warm, placid water—an unhealthy forest with a humid soil in which reptiles swarmed.

### XXIV

THIS land, too, was dreary and silent, and yet after all the desert sands it was very restful to the eyes.

At the village of Poupoubal, on the Diakhallémé, the boat came to a stop, being unable to ascend the river any further.

The passengers were landed, to wait for the canoes or boats which were to convey them to their destination.

### XXV

ONE July night, at nine o'clock, Jean, with Fatou and the spahis from Gorée, took his seat in a canoe, paddled by six

## 158 The Romance of a Spahi

natives, under the guidance of Samba-Boubou, a skilful and experienced 'pilot of the rivers of Guinea, to ascend the river as far as the post of Gadiangué, which was situated several leagues up-stream.

The night was without a moon, but clear, warm, and starry—a real equatorial night. They glided up the calm river with surprising speed, borne inland by a strong stream and the tireless efforts of the boatmen.

The two banks filed past mysteriously through the darkness ; the trees, solidified into one mass by the night, flitted by like great shadows, and forest followed forest.

Samba-Boubou led the song of the black boatmen ; his mournful and shrill voice uttering a high note with savage intonation, and then trailing away to the bottom of the scale, while the boatmen in chorus answered him in grave and slow tones ; and for hours the one strange phrase sounded, followed by the same reply from the boatmen. For a long time they sang the praises of the spahis,

## The Romance of a Spahi 159

of their horses, of their dogs, afterwards the praises of the warriors, of the Soumaré race, and also of Saboutané, a legendary woman of the banks of the Gambia.

When fatigue or sleep caused the regular dip of the paddles to slacken, Samba-Boubou whistled between his teeth, and this reptile's whistle, repeated by all of them, reawakened their ardour as if by magic.

They glided in this way through the night between the great sacred woods of the native races, the ancient trees of which stretched their massive branches above their heads ; angular structures, in appearance like gigantic bones, and with the rigidity of stone, were vaguely outlined in the light diffused by the stars, and then they were gone.

The song of the boatmen and the ripple of the water were mixed with the sinister cries of the monkeys in the woods, and of the birds in the marshes : all the calls, all the mournful night cries resounded in the stillness of the forests. Human cries there



## 160 The Romance of a Spahi

were too ; sometimes the cries of death echoed in the distance, with volleys and the loud beats of the war-drum. The bright light of fires rose at intervals in the forests, when the canoes were passing an African village ; the country was already in a state of war : Sarakholés were fighting against Landoumans, Nalous against Toubacayes, and some of the villages were burning.

Then, for leagues at a time, there was silence—the silence of the night and the depths of the forest. Still the same monotonous chant sounded, the same sound of paddles churning the dark waters, and the same fantastic route, as through the land of shadows ; the water still bore them on its rapid stream ; the silhouettes of the lofty palm trees were above their heads, while forest followed forest. Their speed seemed to increase as hour after hour passed ; the river had wonderfully narrowed, it was now but a stream winding through the woods, as it bore them on towards the interior ; the darkness was profound.

## The Romance of a Spahi 161

The blacks continued their strange chant ; Samba-Boubou repeated his curious notes, while the chorus made their mournful response ; they sang as if in a dream, and paddled furiously with super-human strength, as if galvanised with the fever of reaching their destination.

At last the river wended its way between two ranges of wooded hills. Lights waved from above upon a huge rock which rose up before them ; the lights seemed to run and descend to the banks. Samba-Boubou lit a torch and uttered a shout of encouragement. It was the natives of Gadiangué coming to meet them ; they had reached their destination.

Gadiangué is perched upon the summit of this vertical rock. They ascended by steep paths lighted by negroes carrying torches, and slept at the top upon mats in a big hut prepared, waiting for the daylight, which was not long in appearing.

## 162 The Romance of a Spahi

### XXVI

THE first to awaken after hardly an hour's sleep, Jean, on opening his eyes, saw the white daylight beginning to filter into the hut of boards and to reveal the half-naked young fellows resting on the floor, their heads upon their red jackets. They comprised men from Brittany, Alsace, and Picardy—almost all of them having the fair hair of the North—and Jean had at that moment of awakening a sort of illuminated conception of the melancholy and mysterious picture, of the destinies of all those exiles, the madly wasted lives of men who were now almost in death's clutches.

Then, quite close to him, lay a graceful woman's form, with two black arms circled with silver outstretched in his direction as if to embrace him.

Then bit by bit he recalled that the night before he had reached a village in Guinea, hidden away in the midst of immense savage regions, that he was

## The Romance of a Spahi 163

further off than ever from home, in a place where even letters did not penetrate.

Without noise, so as not to disturb Fatou and the spahis, who were still asleep, he approached the open window, and looked out upon this unknown land.

He was overlooking a precipice a hundred metres high. The hut in which he was seemed suspended in mid-air above it; at his feet lay an interior landscape in the morning dawn, barely lit by pale rays of light.

Steep hills he noted, with masses of foliage such as he had never seen before.

Below, the stream which had brought him wound its way like a long silver ribbon through the mud, half veiled by a white cloud of morning mist, the alligators resting upon its banks appeared from his lofty crag like little lizards; an unknown scent filled the air.

The boatmen lay asleep below at the spot where they had been the previous night, in their canoe upon their paddles.

## 164 The Romance of a Spahi

### XXVII

A LIMPID stream flowed over a bed of dark stones between two walls of moist and shining rock, trees arched overhead, everything seemed so fresh that a person would have thought himself anywhere but in an unexplored corner of the middle of Africa.

Everywhere naked women, of the same tint as the rocks, of a reddish brown, with heads ornamented with amber, were washing waist-cloths and discussing animatedly the battles and events of the previous night. Warriors passed, armed from head to foot, on their way to fight.

Jean took his first stroll around this village where his new destiny had brought him for a period, the length of which was uncertain. There was certainly battle in the air, and the little post of Gadiangué foresaw the moment when it would close its gates to give negro politics time to quieten down; just as one shuts a window against a passing shower.

## The Romance of a Spahi 165

But it was all moving, living, and original to excess. There were verdure, forests, flowers, mountains, and running water, in fact a great and terrible natural splendour. •

All that was not dreary, and it was quite fresh.

From a distance came the sound of the tam-tam. The warlike music drew nearer. Now it was so close and deafening that the women washing in the clear stream, as well as Jean, raised their heads and looked at the valley formed by the shining rocks. It was an ally-chief passing above their heads, after the fashion of the monkeys, over the trunks of fallen trees in great pomp, with music in front. The arms and amulets of his warriors gleamed in the sun, and the warriors passed with light, alert steps through the overwhelming heat.

It was nearly midday when Jean returned to the village along the leafy paths.

Among the mighty trees the huts of Gadiangué are grouped in the shade; they are lofty, almost elegant, beneath

## 166 The Romance of a Spahi

their thatched roofs. Women were sleeping on mats upon the ground ; others sat beneath the verandas singing softly to their children. The warriors, armed to the teeth, were relating their previous night's exploits, as they wiped their great steel knives.

No, it certainly was not dreary. The hot air was terribly exhausting ; but still there was not that melancholy oppression of the banks of the Senegal.

Jean looked, and felt himself to be alive. He now ceased to regret that he had come ; his imagination had pictured nothing like this.

Later on, when he returned to his native land, he would be glad he had set foot in this distant region, and pleased to recall the fact.

He looked forward to his stay in Ouankarah as a period of freedom to be spent in a marvellous land of sport, verdure, and forests ; he accepted it as a respite from the crushing monotony of his service, from the deadly regularity of his exile.

## The Romance of a Spahi 167

### XXVIII

JEAN had a poor old silver watch, which he cherished as dearly as Fatou did her amulets ; it was his father's watch, which the latter had given him when he left home, with a medal which he wore at his breast, fastened to his neck by a chain—this was his most prized possession.

The medal was an effigy of the Virgin. It had been put there by his mother, once when as a little child he had been ill. He, however, recollected it from the time it was first put in the place it had never since left. He was in his first little bed, suffering from some childish ailment—the only illness he had ever suffered in his life. Once on his waking he had seen his mother near him in tears ; it was a winter afternoon, and snow was visible through the window like a white mantle upon the mountain. His mother, after gently raising his little head, had put this medal round his neck ; then she



## 168 The Romance of a Spahi

had kissed him, and he had gone off to sleep again.

That was more than fifteen years ago ; since that day the neck had become much bigger and the chest much broader, but the medal had always remained in its place, and he had never suffered so much as he did the first night he spent in bad company ; the hands of some girl had touched the sacred medal, and the creature had begun to laugh.

As for the watch, it had been bought some forty years ago—not new—by his father, with the first of his savings out of his pay, in the days when he was serving his time in the army. It had once been a very remarkable watch ; but now it was a little clumsy and out of fashion, its chimes betokening its advanced age.

His father still looked upon it as an object of rare value. (Watches were not very common among the mountaineers in his village.)

The watchmaker of a neighbouring town who had repaired it before Jean's departure, had declared it to be pos-

## The Romance of a Spahi · 169

sessed of a very remarkable movement ; and his old father had entrusted to him with all sorts of good advice this friend of his youth.

Jean had at first worn it ; but when with his regiment, on looking at the time he used to hear roars of laughter. Such unkind jokes were made about his “ turnip ” that poor Jean had two or three times become quite red with anger and annoyance. Rather than his watch should be treated with a lack of respect he would have preferred all sorts of insults to himself, and blows in the face which he could have returned. It gave him all the more pain, too, because in his own heart he had been forced to admit that the poor dear old watch was a little bit ridiculous. He had set himself to love it all the more ; so it gave him unutterable pain to see it treated with such contempt, and particularly to himself consider it ridiculous.

Then he had left off wearing it to put an end to these insults. He even left off winding it up, so as not to wear it

## 170 The Romance of a Spahi

out ; all the more because, after the jolting of his journey, and under the influence of the hot climate to which it was unaccustomed, it began to show the most unlikely times, as a protest against the country.

He had lovingly locked it in the box which contained his greatest treasures—his letters, and little souvenirs of home. This box was his coffer of fetishes, one of those absolutely sacred boxes, which sailors always have, and soldiers sometimes keep.

Fatou had been formally forbidden to touch it.

But the watch attracted her. She had found out the way to open the precious coffer, and had herself discovered how to wind up the watch in Jean's absence, how to alter the hands and make it strike ; and putting it quite close to her ear, she listened to its little cracked ticking with the expression of a marmoset which had found a musical box.

## The Romance of a Spahi 171

### XXIX

NEVER at Gadiangué did a person feel fresh or happy ; there were not even, as in Senegal, the cool winter nights.

Even in the early morning, beneath the beautiful foliage, the temperature had the same heavy and deadly feeling about it ; from the early morning before sunrise in those forests populated by romping monkeys, green paroquets, and rare humming-birds ; in the pathways full of shadow, in the long moist grass where the snakes glided there was always at any hour and everywhere the same stove-like heat, humid, overpowering, and poisonous. The warm oppression of the Equator was concentrated every night beneath the foliage of the great trees, and everywhere there was fever in the air.

In three months, as had been anticipated, peace was restored throughout the country. War and the black-butchery was over. Caravans began to take the road again, bringing to Gadi-

## 172 The Romance of a Spahi

angué, from the heart of Africa, gold, ivory, and feathers, all the products of the Soudan and inland Guinea.

When orders had been issued for the return of the reinforcements, a vessel came for the spahis and waited at the mouth of the river to convey them to Senegal.

Alas ! the poor spahis were no longer at full strength. Of the twelve who had started, two failed to answer their names for the return journey ; two were resting in the warm earth at Gadiangué, carried off by fever.

But Jean's time had not come, and one day he again traversed in the opposite direction the route he had pursued three months earlier in Samba-Boubou's canoe.

xxx

It was midday this time, and the journey was begun in a native canoe protected by a moist awning.

## The Romance of a Spahi 173

They passed the thick foliage of the bank and glided beneath the branches and roots hanging from the trees, to take advantage of the little warm and dangerous shadow they cast upon the water.

The water seemed stagnant and motionless ; it was as heavy as oil, and little vapours of fever were visible here and there hovering above its shining surface.

The sun was at its zenith ; it shone straight down from the midst of a violet-grey sky, a tin-like grey which was quite dimmed by these miasmas of the marshes.

The heat of the sun was so terrible that the black boatmen were obliged to rest in spite of their great courage. The tepid water had ceased to appease their thirst ; they were exhausted and bathed in sweat.

But when they stopped paddling, the canoe, gently impelled by an almost insensible stream, drifted on its way. The spahis could see at close quarters this strange world, the living creatures beneath the mangroves which inhabit the

## 174 The Romance of a Spahi

marshes of the whole of Equatorial Africa.

In the shade, amid the dark corners of the great roots, this world was sleeping.

There, two paces distant from them as they noiselessly passed, drifting slowly without even disturbing the birds, within reach, were glaucous alligators, lazily stretched out upon the mud, yawning with distended and slimy mouths, and smiling and idiotic expression ; there were light white egrets also sleeping, rolled in a snowy ball at the end of one of their long legs, and perched, to avoid dirtying themselves, upon the very backs of the resting alligators ; there were kingfishers, with every shade of green and blue in their plumage, taking their siesta at the water's edge in the branches, in company with lazy lizards ; and there were also great and wonderful butterflies hatched in this high temperature, slowly opening and shutting their wings, settling anywhere and looking like dead leaves when their wings were closed, and

## The Romance of a Spahi 175

as brilliant as mysterious caskets of jewels, with the glittering of their pearly blues and metallic brilliance, when they were open.

Everywhere they passed mangrove roots, roots after roots hanging in all directions like coils of rope ; they were of every length and size, for, entangled and hanging down in every direction, they seemed like thousands of nerves, trunks, and grey arms endeavouring to enlase and overrun everything ; immense tracts of land were covered with these tangles of roots. Upon every mudbank, all the roots, and all the alligators, there were serried families of big grey crabs, which were everlastingly waving their only claw, of ivory whiteness, as if endeavouring in their dreams to seize imaginary prey. This somnambulistic motion of all the crabs was, beneath the thick foliage, the only perceptible stirring of this creation at rest.

When the black boatmen had taken breath, they resumed their savage chant, and paddled furiously. Then the spahis'



## 176 The Romance of a Spahi

canoe clove the still waters of the Diakhallémé and descended the winding course of the river, travelling rapidly between the forests on either bank.

As they drew near the sea, the hills and large trees of the interior disappeared. They came once more to the great flat land, over which an inextricable confusion of mangroves was cast like a uniform green mantle.

The midday oppression had passed away, and a few birds were on the wing. But silence still reigned over this land ; as far as the eye could reach was the same uniformity, the same trees, the same calm. More than one monotonous border of mangroves in the distance reminded one of the well-known shapes of the poplars of our French rivers.

To right and left at intervals opened watercourses equally silent, which lost themselves in the distance, fringed by banks of similar verdure. It required the consummate experience of Samba-Boubou to find his way through the *dædalus* of these streams.

## The Romance of a Spahi 177

No sound or movement was audible, except here and there the enormous plunge of a hippopotamus, disturbed by the voices of the boatmen, as it disappeared after leaving great concentric eddies upon the warm still water.

So Fatou shut her eyes tight where she lay at the stern of the canoe for greater safety, with a double shelter of leaves and moist awning over her head. She had obtained her information in advance, and knew what denizens she might expect to see upon the river banks.

When she reached Peupeubal, she had completed the entire journey without daring to take one glance around her. Jean, in order to persuade her to move, had to most positively affirm that they had reached their destination, and to assure her that it was quite dark, and consequently the danger had ceased to exist.

She lay quite benumbed in the stern of the canoe, and replied in the plaintive tones of a spoilt child. She wanted

## 178 The Romance of a Spahi

Jean to take her in his arms and carry her on board the vessel for Gorée,\* and this he did. Such tricks were very successful with the poor spahi, who at times spoilt Fatou, in the absence of any one else, through his need of loving some one—and need of love.

### XXXI

THE Governor of Gorée remembered the promise he had made to the spahi, Pierre Boyer. On his return, Jean was again dispatched to Saint Louis to finish his period of exile.

Jean felt keen emotion at seeing once more appear its sandy stretches and the white city ; he was attached to it, as a person is to every place where he has suffered and lived for a long time. Then he experienced some happiness at first, in returning to a place which was almost a city almost civilised, where he would find old friends and familiar customs ;

## The Romance of a Spahi 179

he had to be deprived of them for some time, in order to look forward to them on his return. Houses are not in great demand at Saint Louis. Samba-Hamet's hut had not found a fresh occupant ; Coura-n'diaye saw Jean and Fatou, and opened the door of their old home to them.

The days resumed their former monotonous course to the spahi.

### XXXII

NOTHING was changed in Saint Louis. There was the same quiet in their surroundings. The marabous which dwelt in their roof snapped their beaks with the same sound of dry wood, like the gear of a windmill, as they sunned themselves.

The negresses were still making their eternal kouss-kouss. Everywhere they met the same familiar sounds, the same

## 180 The Romance of a Spahi

monotonous silence, the same calm of oppressed nature.

But Jean was more and more wearied by all these things.

Day by day he lost his love for Fatou ; he became absolutely disgusted with his black mistress. She had become more exacting and also more evil, especially since she had discovered her hold over Jean's mind through his staying behind for her sake.

There were frequent scenes between them ; she sometimes exasperated him by her perversity and malice. Then he began to hit her with his whip, not very hard at first, but afterwards more so. Upon Fatou's bare back the blows sometimes left marks like cuts. Afterwards he regretted them and was ashamed.

One day on returning to the hut he saw in the distance a Khassonké, a sort of big black gorilla, jump quickly out of the window. Nothing was said that time ; it was all the same to him, after all, what she did.

The feeling of pity or perhaps love

## The Romance of a Spahi 181

which he might have once experienced for her had quite departed ; he was satiated ; he was wearied and disgusted. He still kept her solely through inertia.

The last year was partly gone ; he felt the end, his departure, was drawing near. He began to count the months.

Sleep had left him, a thing which always happens in the long run in these enervating lands. He passed hours of the night leaning at his window, enjoying the freshness of his last winter, and especially dreaming of his return.

The moon, on completing its tranquil path over the desert, usually appeared at his window. He loved those beautiful nights in the warm climate, those rosy dawns over the sand, those silvery trails upon the river's placid surface ; every night the wind bore him, from the plains of Sorr, the distant cry of the jackals, and even that mournful wail had become a familiar sound to him.

When he thought that soon he was going to leave it all for ever, even that

## 182 The Romance of a Spahi

thought threw something like a vague feeling of sadness over the joy of his return.

### XXXIII

FOR several days Jean had not opened his treasure-chest, and had not seen his old watch.

He was in quarters on duty when he remembered it with a feeling of uneasiness.

He returned home walking more quickly than usual, and on his arrival opened his box.

His heart stopped beating ; he could not see his watch ! He feverishly turned over the other articles. No, it was not there !

Fatou was singing in unconcerned fashion, watching him out of the corner of her eye. She was threading beads, combining colour effects for her necklaces ; these great preparations were

## The Romance of a Spahi 183

for the next day's fêtes, at which it was necessary to appear beautiful and well dressed.

"Have you put it somewhere else? Tell me quickly, Fatou. I forbade you to touch it! Where have you put it?"

"I don't know," Fatou unconcernedly replied.

A cold sweat began to gather upon Jean's brow, for he was distraught with anxiety and anger. He caught hold of Fatou, and shook her roughly by the arm.

"Where have you put it? Come, tell me, quickly."

"I don't know."

Then suddenly a light came to him. He had just noticed a new waist-cloth, with blue and red zigzags, carefully folded and hidden in a corner ready for the morrow's fête.

He understood, seized the waist-cloth, unfolded it, and throwing it on the floor:

"You have sold the watch," he cried. "Come, be quick, Fatou, tell the truth."

In a mad rage he threw her on her



## 184 The Romance of a Spahi

knees upon the floor and picked up his whip. Fatou knew very well that she had touched his one precious fetish, and that it would be serious. But she had the audacity of the unpunished : she had already done so much and Jean had forgiven.

But she had never before seen Jean like that ; she uttered a cry, and was frightened ; she began to kiss his feet.

“ Forgive me, Jean ! Forgive me ! ”

Jean did not realise his strength in his moments of fury. He was subject to those savage fits of violence found in children who have grown up in the woods. He struck hard on Fatou's bare back, marking it with weals from which the blood flowed, and his rage increased as he struck.

Then he felt ashamed of what he had done, and throwing down his whip, he sank into a seat.

## The Romance of a Spahi 185

### XXXIV

A MINUTE later Jean was running towards the market of Guet-n'dar.

Fatou had confessed at last and given the name of the negro merchant to whom she had sold the watch. He hoped that it was still there and that he could repurchase his poor old watch. He had just drawn his month's pay, and that ought to be enough.

He walked very very quickly, he ran ; he was most eager to get there, just as if while he was on the way he had known some black purchaser was there bargaining for it and ready to take it away.

At Guet-n'dar upon the sand was chaos, a mixture of all the types and babel of all the tongues of the Soudan.

There was held continuously the great market, to which flocked people from all districts, where everything could be bought, valuables and absurd things, useful and extravagant produce, curios, gold and butter, food and ointments,

## 186 The Romance of a Spahi

live sheep and manuscripts, captives and porridge, amulets and vegetables. .

On one side enclosing the scene was an arm of the river with Saint Louis in the distance ; its straight lines and Babylonian terraces, its blue lime-whiteness spotted with the red of bricks were visible, and here and there the yellow tuft of a palm tree mounted towards the blue sky.

On the other side was Guet-n'dar, the negro ant-hill with thousands of pointed roofs.

Near at hand, from stationary caravans, the camels of which were kneeling on the sand, Moors were unloading their packages of ground nuts and fetish-bags of worked leather.

Men and women dealers crouched upon the sand, laughing or bargaining ; jostled and trampled upon, themselves and their ware, by the purchasers.

There were the sellers of sour milk, which was contained in buckskins sewn together with the hair inside ; butter-sellers with huge three-cornered chignons,

## The Romance of a Spahi 187

plated with copper, fishing their wares in handfuls out of hairy leathern bottles, rolling it in their fingers in little dirty rolls to sell at a halfpenny each, and wiping their hands on their hair ; there were sellers of simples, of small packets of herbs with mysterious powers, of lizards' tails and roots with magic properties ; there were merchants squatting on the ground whose wares comprised nuggets of gold, pieces of jade, amber pearls, and silver wares, and all these articles were displayed upon dirty cloths stretched on the ground, where the customers trampled upon it ; there were sellers of nuts, sweets, strange comestibles, food dried in the sun, and sugary cakes which were devoured by the flies.

The sellers of salt fish, pipes, and odds and ends were to be found in large numbers, as well as dealers in old jewellery, ancient waist-cloths dirty and unclean, of Galam butter for frizzing the hair, of little plaits of hair cut or torn from the heads of dead negresses, and ready for use again in a similar capacity.

## 188 The Romance of a Spahi

There were dealers in amulets, old guns, gazelle ordure, old Korans annotated by the holy men of the desert, dealers in musk, flutes, old silver-hilted daggers, steel knives which had slit bellies, tam-tams, giraffe horns, and old guitars.

Crowds of beggars and black mendicants were squatting beneath the skimpy yellow cocoanut palms; leprous old women stretched out hands covered with white ulcers asking for alms, and old half-dead skeletons, with legs swollen from elephantiasis, lay with big bloated flies and maggots sucking their gaping sores.

The camels' dung lay upon the ground with all sorts of rubbish and filth, while straight down upon it all beat one of those blazing suns which makes a person feel that it is close to him; the rays of which roast like a fire close at hand.

The horizon of it all was the desert, and its infinite flatness.

There in front of the wares of a certain Bob-Bakary-Diam, Jean stopped, searching with an eager and anxious glance and

## The Romance of a Spahi 189

beating heart the collection of curious articles spread out in front of him. •

“ Oh, yes, white man,” the proprietor said with a tranquil smile, “ the watch which strikes ? Four days ago the girl sold it to me for three pieces of silver. Most unfortunately, white man, as it struck I sold it again the same day to a chief of Trarzas, who has gone with a caravan to Timbuctoo.”

Well, it was over ! It was no use thinking any more about the poor old watch ! •

- Poor Jean experienced a feeling of despair, a heart-wrench, just as if through his own fault he had lost a dear friend.

If he could have embraced his old father and begged his pardon, that would have consoled him a little. If only the watch had fallen into the sea, or the river, or been lost in the desert ; but to be sold, profaned by Fatou ! That was too much ! He would almost have wept, had he not felt such rage in his heart against the creature. •

It was the same Fatou who during

## 190 The Romance of a Spahi

four years had taken his money, his dignity, his life ! To keep her he had forfeited his promotion, his whole future as a soldier ; for her he had stayed in Africa—for that evil and perverse little creature, black in face and soul, surrounded by amulets and witchcraft. He got excited as he walked in the sun ; he was seized with a sort of superstitious horror of her spells ; against her wickedness, her impudence and the audacity of her latest action ; he was filled with a mad fury. He returned home, walking quickly, his blood boiling, exasperated, by grief and anger, his head in a whirl.

### XXXV

SHE was awaiting his return with the keenest anxiety.

The moment he entered she saw that he had not recovered his old chiming watch.

## The Romance of a Spahi 191

His manner was so fierce that she thought he would probably kill her. •

She understood that ; for if any one had taken from her a particular shrivelled amulet, her most precious possession, one which her mother had given her when quite little in Galam, she would have thrown herself upon the thief, and if possible killed him.

She realised that she had done something very wrong, urged on by evil spirits, and her great failing, too strong, a love of personal adornment. She knew very well that she was wicked. She was angry at having caused Jean so much pain ; that to her was equivalent to being killed, but she would have liked to kiss him.

Now she almost liked the times when he beat her, for these were almost the only occasions that he touched her, and that she could touch him as she clung to him and begged forgiveness. This time, when he was about to seize her to kill her, as she had nothing to risk, she would exert all her strength in order to embrace



## 192 The Romance of a Spahi

him to try and reach his lips ; afterwards she would cling to him, kissing him till she was dead—it would make no difference to her.

If poor Jean could have understood what was passing in her poor little black heart, without a doubt, because of her unhappiness, he would have again forgiven her ; it was not hard to touch his feelings.

But Fatou did not speak, because she realised her feelings could not be expressed in words, and the idea of that supreme struggle, in which she was going to clasp and embrace him and die by his hand, thus ending everything, pleased her ; she waited, fixing upon him her big enamel-like eyes with an expression of passion and terror in them.

But Jean had entered and said nothing; he did not even look at her, and then she ceased to understand.

He even threw down his whip as he entered, because he was ashamed of his brutality to a little girl, and he did not want to renew it.

## The Romance of a Spahi 193

All he did was to snatch down all the amulets hung upon the walls and throw them out of the windows.

Then he picked up the waist-cloths, necklaces, and calabashes, and without uttering a word threw them outside on the sand.

Fatou began to understand what her fate was ; she realised that all was ended, and she was turned out.

When everything belonging to her was outside, scattered in all directions, Jean pointed to the door, simply saying through his clenched teeth, in a hoarse voice which admitted of no reply :

“ Be off ! ”

Fatou, with drooping head, went out without saying a word.

No, she had imagined nothing so horrible as being driven out like that. She felt she was going mad, and she went away without daring to lift her head, without being able to utter a cry, say a word, or shed a tear.

## 194 The Romance of a Spahi

### XXXVI

THEN Jean began calmly to collect everything belonging to him, to carefully fold up his things in soldier fashion; he packed up with care, because of the orderly methods unconsciously acquired by him in the regiment, though hurrying all the time lest he should be overcome with regret and weaken in his purpose.

He felt somewhat consoled by her terrible expulsion, by the satisfaction given to the memory of the old watch; he was happy because he had displayed the courage to do it, and told himself that soon he would be embracing his father and telling him the whole story in order to obtain his forgiveness.

Then after he had finished he went to Coura-n'diaye, the owner of the hut. He saw Fatou, who had taken refuge there, crouching motionless in a corner. The little slaves had collected her belongings and put them in the calabashes close to her.

## The Romance of a Spahi 195

Jean would not even look at her. He went to Coura-n'diaye, paid his month's rent, and told her he should not return ; then, throwing his light luggage over his shoulder, he departed.

Poor old watch. His father had said to him : " Jean, it is a little old-fashioned, but it is a very good watch, and they are not made so well nowadays. When you are well off, later on, you shall buy yourself a fashionable one if you please, but you will return this one to me. Forty years it has been my companion ; I had it when with my regiment, and when I am buried, if you have no further use for it, don't fail to put it in my coffin ; it will keep me company where I am going."

Coura-n'diaye had taken the spahi's money without reflecting about his abrupt departure, with the indifference of an old courtesan accustomed to anything.

When Jean was outside he called his native dog, which followed him with drooping ears as if understanding the

## 196 The Romance of a Spahi

position and annoyed at going. Then he set off without turning his head, descending the long streets of the silent city in the direction of the barracks.

## THIRD PART

### I

AFTER Jean had thus definitely expelled Fatou, he felt a great relief at his action. When he had arranged in his soldier's chest the little baggage he had brought from the house, he felt freer and happier. It appeared to him to be the first step towards his departure, towards that much-anticipated return home which was now but a few months distant. But he still pitied her. He wanted once more to send her his pay, to assist her in setting up house again or departing.

But as he preferred not to see her again, he entrusted spahi Muller with the commission.

Muller repaired to the house, but Fatou had gone.

"She was very much upset," the little

## 198 The Romance of a Spahi

slaves said, forming a ring and talking all together.

"In the evening she would not eat the food we got ready for her."

"In the night," little Sam-Lélé said, "I heard her talking aloud in her dreams; even the dogs yelped, and that is a very bad sign. But I could not understand what she was saying."

It was certain she had gone, carrying her calabashes on her head, a little before sunrise.

A woman named Bafonfalé-Diop, the chief of the slaves of the house, a very inquisitive woman by nature, had followed her at a distance and had seen her turn across the little wooden bridge over the small arm of the river in the direction of N'dar-toute, appearing to know quite well where she was going.

In quarters it was thought she had gone to ask for shelter from an ugly old fellow at N'dar-toute, who was very rich and admired her very much. Besides, she was quite good-looking enough not to have much anxiety about her future.

## The Romance of a Spahi 199

For some time longer Jean refrained from going near the house of Couran'diaye.

But he soon forgot.

It seemed to him too that he had recovered his 'white man's' dignity, which had been soiled by contact with that black flesh ; those past intoxications, that fever of the senses surexcited by Africa's climate, only inspired him, when he looked back, with profound disgust.

He built up for himself a new existence of continence and honour.

In future he would live in quarters like a wise man. He would save in order to take back to Jeanne Méry a heap of souvenirs of Senegal : beautiful mats, which later on would be ornaments for their long-deferred home ; embroidered waist-cloths, the rich colours of which would excite the admiration of his fellow-countrymen, and which in their household would serve as magnificent table-cloths ; then in particular he would take to her earrings and a cross of fine



## 200 The Romance of a Spahi

Galam gold, which he would order specially for her from the greatest black artists. She would wear them when, dressed in her best, on Sunday, she went to church with the Peyrals, and certainly no other young woman in the village would have such beautiful jewellery.

The poor spahi, fine fellow though he was with so serious an expression, formed in his young uncultivated mind a number of almost childish plans like these, the naïve dreams of happiness, of family life and peaceful and honourable existence.

Jean was at that time nearly twenty-six. He looked a little older than he really was, as often happens in the case of people who have led a rough life in the open air, on the sea, or in the army. His five years in Senegal had greatly changed him ; his features had become more clearly defined ; he was thinner and more sunburnt ; he had a more Arab and soldierly manner ; his shoulders and chest were much broader, although his waist had remained slender and supple ; he wore his fez and twisted his long brown

## The Romance of a Spahi 201

moustache in a soldier's coquettish style which suited him admirably. His strength and his extreme good looks inspired in those who approached him a sort of involuntary respect. People spoke differently to him than they did to the others.

A painter would have selected him as a complete type of noble charm and virile perfection.

### II

ONE day in an envelope bearing the postmark of his native village, Jean found two letters, one from his dear old mother, the other from Jeanne.

Letter from Françoise Peyral to her son.

“ MY DEAR BOY,

“ There is, since my last letter, much news to tell you, and you will be very

## 202 The Romance of a Spahi

surprised to hear it. But first of all, do not worry ; you must do as we are doing, my dear boy, pray to God and always be full of hope. I will begin by telling you that there has come into this neighbourhood a young bailiff, a new-comer, M. Prosper Suirot by name, who is not very well liked about here, because he is hard upon the poor and uses underhand methods ; but he is a man with a good position, that cannot be gainsaid. Now this man Suirot asked for Jeanne's hand from your Uncle Méry, who accepted him as a son-in-law. Then Méry came here and made a scene about you one evening ; he had made inquiries about you from your officers without telling us, and he had received a bad account of you, so it appears. They say you have a black wife out there ; that you have kept her against the wishes of your officers ; and that is the reason you have not received your promotion ; that there are bad reports of you in circulation ; in fact, I saw many things, my dear boy, I should never have believed, had they

## The Romance of a Spahi 203

not been written on official paper, which he showed us, and it had upon it the crest of your regiment. Afterwards Jeanne fled to us in tears, saying she would never marry Suirot, and never be the wife of any one but yourself, my dear Jean, and that she would prefer to enter a convent. She has written you a letter which I am enclosing, and in it she tells you what to do ; she is of age, and has a good head ; do everything she suggests, and write by return of post to your uncle as she tells you. You will be back home again in ten months, my dear boy ; with excellent conduct to the end of your service and by praying to God, matters will no doubt arrange themselves ; but we are very worried as you can imagine ; we are afraid, too, that Méry will prevent Jeanne coming to visit us again, and that will be very unfortunate.

“ Peyral joins me, my dear boy, in sending you our best love, and asking you to write to us, as soon as possible.

## 204 The Romance of a Spahi

“ Your old mother, who will love you  
all her life,

“ FRANÇOISE PEYRAL.”

Jeanne Méry to her cousin Jean.

“ MY DEAR JEAN,

“ I am so worried, that I would like to die now. I am so unhappy because you did not come home and never speak of your approaching return. Now my parents, in agreement with my godfather, want me to marry Suirot, whom I have previously mentioned to you ; they give me a headache telling me how rich he is and how honoured I ought to feel by his proposal. I have refused, as you may imagine, and I am wearing out my eyes with weeping.

“ My dear Jean, I am very unhappy, because I have everybody against me. Olivette and Rose laugh at my eyes, which are always red ; I believe they would be very glad to marry Suirot if he would only have them. But as far as I am concerned, the thought of such a thing makes me shudder ; I am quite

## The Romance of a Spahi 205

certain that I shall never marry him, and I may escape them all by entering the convent of Saint Bruno for good, if they drive me to extremities. .

“ If I could only go to your home sometimes it would cheer me up to talk to your mother, for whom I have as much respect and love as if I were her daughter ; but I have already been the recipient of many looks because I go there too often, and (who knows ?) I may soon be forbidden to visit your mother altogether.

“ My dear Jean, you must do everything I am going to tell you. I hear there are bad reports in circulation about you ; I tell myself they are started with the sole object of influencing me, but I do not believe a word of the stories, they are not possible, and nobody here knows you like I do. All the same, I should be very glad of a few lines from you and an assurance of your love : you know such an assurance is always pleasant even when a person knows it quite well all the time. Then write at once to my father, and ask his permission

## 206 The Romance of a Spahi

to marry me ; in particular, promise him that when you are my husband you will always behave as a sensible and steady fellow, against whose character nobody will ever have the chance of saying a word ; after that I will appeal to him on my knees. God may have pity on us, dear Jean.

“ Your fiancée for life,

“ JEANNE MÉRY.”

In a village people never learn to express the feelings of the heart properly ; young girls brought up in the open feel very keenly sometimes, but words fail them when they attempt to reproduce their emotions and thoughts ; the refined vocabulary of passion is closed to them ; they can only express their feelings by the aid of naïve and homely phrases ; that is the whole difference.

Jeanne must have felt very keenly to have written such a letter, and Jean, who also spoke the same simple tongue, understood all the resolution and love

## The Romance of a Spahi 207

underlying her words. Face to face with his fiancée's ardent fidelity, he had confidence and hope ; he put into his reply all the love and gratitude he could express, and he addressed a formal proposal to his Uncle Méry accompanied by the sincerest of promises regarding his future wisdom and good conduct ; then he awaited without too much anxiety the return mail from France.

M. Prosper Suirot was a young bailiff, skinny and stooping, a fierce freethinker uttering æsthetic drivel about all the holy things of the past ; a short-sighted pen-driver, whose little red eyes were protected by smoked-glasses. His rival would have aroused a feeling of pity in Jean, who felt an instinctive repulsion for ugly and badly built people.

Attracted by Jeanne's face and dowry, the little bailiff thought in his foolishly conceited way that he was conferring a great honour on the young peasant girl by offering her his ugly person and lordly social position ; he had even made up his mind that after the marriage, in order to



## 208 The Romance of a Spahi

uplift her to the same social level as himself, Jeanne, as a lady, should wear a hat.

### III

SIX months had passed. The mails from France had brought poor Jean really no very bad news, but nevertheless no good.

Uncle Méry remained inflexible ; but Jeanne was firm too, and into the old Frenchwoman's letters she always slipped for her sweetheart a few words, showing her fidelity and love.

Jean himself was full of hope, and no longer doubted that on his return home everything could be easily arranged.

He more than ever indulged in castles in the air. After five years' exile his return to his native village appeared to him something like an apotheosis ; all the dreams of the poor exile reverted to that radiant moment, to the time when he took his seat, wearing his spahi's

## The Romance of a Spahi 209

burnous in the diligence bound for his native village, when he saw the Cévennes appear once more, the familiar shapes of his native hills, the well-known road, the tower he loved so well, and, last of all, the paternal roof by the roadside, where he would clasp in his arms with mad delight his dear old parents.

Then together all three of them would visit the Mérys. In the village the good folk, the young girls, would come to their doors to see him pass; he would be considered handsome in his unfamiliar uniform and with his African manner. He would show his Uncle Méry his sergeant's stripes, which he had at last received, and their effect would be quite irresistible. After all, his Uncle Méry was a good fellow; in days gone by he had chidden Jean very often, but he loved him as well; Jean remembered that very clearly now, he was quite sure of it. (From a distance, when in exile, one always sees in the most favourable light those left behind; they are remembered as being kind and affectionate; their

## 210 The Romance of a Spahi

faults, their harsh treatment and squabbles are forgotten.) Then it would be quite impossible for Uncle Méry not to give way when he saw his two children imploring him together ; he would most certainly soften and put Jeanne's trembling hand in Jean's ! Then what happiness, what a sweet and pleasant life, what an earthly paradise theirs would be !

But Jean did not see himself very clearly, dressed as the other men in his native village, nor, in particular, wearing the modest country hat. That change was a subject upon which he did not care to let his thoughts linger ; it seemed to him that he would no longer be himself, the proud spahi, in that garb he wore in the past. It was in his red uniform that he had tasted life, it was upon African soil that he had become a man, and even more so than he suspected ; he loved all that : he loved his Arab fez, his sabre, his horse, his great though accursed land of thirst, his desert.

• Jean did not know what disillusionment awaits young men—sailors, soldiers,

## The Romance of a Spahi 211

spahis—when they return to the native village of which they have dreamed for so long, and which from a distance they have viewed through enchanted prisms.

Alas ! what sadness and monotonous boredom often await these exiles on their return home.

Poor spahis, like himself, acclimatised and enervated on African soil, have sometimes wept for Senegal's desolate shores. The long rides on horseback, the free life, the intense light and vast horizons are all missing, and missed when one is accustomed to them ; in the peace of home life a feeling comes over a man something like a longing for the fierce sun and eternal heat, a regret for the desert, a nostalgia for the sand.

### IV

BUT Boubakar-Ségou, the great black king, was up to mischief in the Diambois and the territory of Djiagabar. A war-

## 212 The Romance of a Spahi

like expedition was in the air : it was talked about in Saint Louis at the officers' mess ; that fact was commented upon and discussed in a thousand ways among the soldiers, spahis, sharpshooters, and marines. It was the rumour of the day, and every man hoped to take his share of the coming promotion, a medal or a step.

Jean, who was nearing the end of his time, promised himself he would wipe out any reproach which might have been levelled at him because of his past conduct ; he dreamed of fastening in his buttonhole the little yellow ribbon of the brave, the military medal ; he wanted to say his final good-bye to the land of the blacks by some brave deed, which would leave his name ineffaceable in the spahis' quarters, in that corner of the earth where he had lived so long and suffered so keenly.

Between the barracks, the commander of the fleet, and the Government, a rapid exchange of correspondence took place every day. Big sealed letters came to

## The Romance of a Spahi 213

the spahis' camp, making the red-coats dream; they anticipated a long and severe expedition, and the time was drawing near. The spahis sharpened their big swords and furbished up their accoutrements with bravado and bold words, glasses of absinthe, and cheerful talk.

### V

THE early days of October had come. Jean, who since the morning had been distributing far and wide official papers, made his last call at the Governor's palace with a big official envelope.

In the long straight street, as dead and empty as a thoroughfare of Thebes or Memphis, he saw approaching him in the sun another red-coat holding up a letter. He had a vague feeling of apprehension, and hurried to meet him.

It was Sergeant Muller, who was bringing the spahis their French mail,

## 214 The Romance of a Spahi

which had arrived an hour before by caravan from Dakar.

“ For you, Peyral ! ” he said as he held out an envelope bearing the postmark of Jean’s native village.

### VI

THIS letter, which Jean had been expecting for a month, burned his hands, yet he hesitated to read it. He resolved to wait, till he had finished his round before opening it.

He reached the Governor’s palace, the gate of which was open, and entered.

In the garden was the same lack of animation as in the street. A big tame lioness was stretched in the sun, looking like an affectionate cat. Ostriches were asleep on the ground near a few stiff bluey aloes. It was midday, there was not a soul in sight ; the silence of a necropolis overhung the great white

## The Romance of a Spahi 215

terraces upon which yellow palm trees cast motionless shadows.

Jean, looking for some one to address, reached the office, where he found the Governor surrounded by the various chiefs of the Colonial Service.

There, most extraordinary to relate, the group was looking animated; they all seemed to be discussing grave matters, at this hour traditionally devoted to rest and siesta.

In exchange for the envelope which Jean brought he received another addressed to the commanding officer of the spahis.

It contained the definite marching orders, which in the afternoon were communicated to all the troops in Saint Louis.

### VII

WHEN Jean found himself once again in the deserted street, he could not wait any



## 216 The Romance of a Spahi

longer, so with trembling hands opened his letter.

This time he found nothing but his old mother's writing in it, and that was more shaky this time than ever, and bore traces of her tears.

As he devoured the lines the poor spahi was overcome by a feeling of dizziness ; he raised his hands to his head as he leant against the wall.

The Governor had told him that the dispatch he was taking was very urgent ; he piously kissed old Françoise's signature and went on his way like a drunken man.

Was that possible ? It was ended, ended for ever ! The poor exile's fiancée had been taken from him—the fiancée of his childhood whom his parents had chosen for him !

“ The banns are published, the ceremony will take place in less than a month. I was very suspicious, my dear boy, last month. Jeanne never came to see us. But I dared not tell you in order not to torment you, as we were powerless to do anything.

## • The Romance of a Spahi 217

“ We are in the depths of despair. Now, my boy, yesterday Peyral had a thought which terrified us both : it was that you would not care to come home, and would stay in Africa.

“ We are both very old. Jean, my beloved son, your dear mother implores you on her bended knees not to let this prevent you from being wise, and from soon returning home to us as we are expecting you to do. Otherwise I should prefer to die at once, and so would Peyral.”

• Incoherent, tumultuous thoughts crowded through Jean's brain.

He made a rapid calculation of dates. No, it was not over yet, it was not an accomplished fact. There was the telegraph ! But what was the use of thinking about that ! There was no cable between France and Senegal. Even had there been, what more could he have said ? If he could only have gone, leaving everything behind, sailed upon a ship of extraordinary speed and arrived in time ; by throwing himself at their feet with

## 218 The Romance of a Spahi

tears and supplications, he perhaps might still have succeeded in softening them. But being so far away, how impossible it all was, how powerless he felt ! The ceremony would be over before he could do anything, before he could even send them a cry of anguish.

It seemed to him that his head was being compressed in iron hands, that his chest was being crushed in a powerful vice.

He stopped again to re-read the letter, and then, recollecting that he was conveying an urgent order from the Governor, he folded it up and resumed his walk.

Around him everywhere was the mid-day calm. The old Moorish houses formed an unbroken line, with their milky whiteness, beneath the deep blue of the sky. Sometimes, on passing, a plaintive or slumberous 'negress' song sounded from within their brick walls ; or else upon the doorstep lay some intensely black negro sleeping quite naked in the sun, wearing a coral necklace and making a dark patch in the uniformity

## • The Romance of a Spahi 219

of light. Upon the hard sand of the streets lizards followed one another with a comical little swaying of the head, and traced with their trailing tails an infinity of fantastic zigzags which were as complicated as Arab drawings. The far-off sound of the mills, as monotonous and regular as the silence, came from Guet-n'dar, deadened by the warm and heavy southern air.

This tranquillity of exhausted nature seemed to laugh to scorn poor Jean's exaltation and exasperate his grief; it oppressed him like a physical ailment, it stifled him like a leaden shroud.

This land suddenly produced in him the sensation of a vast tomb.

The spahi awakened as from a five-years' sleep. A tremendous struggle was taking place in him, a revolt against everybody and everything! Why had he been taken from his native village, from his mother, to be buried during the best years of his life in this dead man's land? By what right had he been converted into that creature apart, called

## 220 The Romance of a Spahi

a spahi, that half-African soldier, a degraded wretch, forgotten by everybody, and finally given up by his fiancée ?

He, experienced a sensation of mad rage in his heart ; he felt the necessity of blaming somebody or something, the need of torturing, strangling, crushing one of his fellows in his powerful arms.

But there was nothing, nothing around him except silence, heat, and the sand.

Alas ! he no longer had a friend in the whole of this land, not one friend to whom he could tell his troubles. He was indeed deserted and alone in the world !

### VIII

JEAN turned to his quarters and threw the envelope entrusted to him to the first person he met ; then he set off haphazard upon a rapid and aimless tramp ; that was his method of stifling his sorrow.

## The Romance of a Spahi 221

He passed the bridge at Guet-n'dar and turned to the south towards the headland of Barbary, just as on the night four years before he had left in despair the house of Cora.

But this time his despair was a man's, deep and supreme, and his life was broken.

He walked for a long while towards the south, losing sight of Saint Louis and the black villages, and sat down exhausted at the foot of a sand-hill overlooking the sea.

• His ideas were incoherent. The power of the sun had affected him.

He noticed he was at a spot he had never visited before, and began to pace around it with wild looks.

The hillock bristled with strange columns, which bore inscriptions in the tongue of the priests of Mahgreb. Whitened bones lay about haphazard, just as they had been unearthed long ago by the jackals. There were, too, a few green boughs looking as if they were lost in the midst of the absolute aridity; the

## 222 The Romance of a Spahi

verdure consisted of garlands of creepers of the most brilliant green, which twined through the middle of the ancient skulls, arms, and legs, here and there, opening large red blossoms.

In the distance other funereal mounds rose over the flat plain, giving it a mournful air.

Upon the shore big flocks of rosy-white pelicans wandered, while the mirage of the dusk lent them at a distance regular shapes and impossible sizes.

The evening had come, the sun had sunk into the ocean, and a fresher breeze was blowing from the open sea.

Jean took out his mother's letter and began to read it again.

"Now, my dear boy, yesterday Peyral had an idea which terrified us both; it was that you would not return home—that you would stay in Africa.

"We are both of us very old. Jean, my dear boy, your loving mother entreats you on her knees not to let this prevent you from being wise, and coming back to us almost directly as we expect. Other-

## • The Romance of a Spahi 223

wise, I would prefer to die at once, and so would Peyral.” •

Then poor Jean felt his heart breaking, his breast heaved with sobs, and the whole of his revolt melted into tears.

### IX

Two days later, all the boats of the fleet required for the expedition were assembled to the northward of Saint Louis, at the bend of the river near Pop-n’Kior.

The embarkation of the troops took place in the midst of a vast crowd and mighty uproar. All the wives and children of the black sharpshooters crowded the banks, wailing to the sun like mad folk. Caravans of Moors, just arrived from the heart of the Soudan, formed a circle with their camels, merchandise, and beautiful young women to gaze upon the scene. •



## 224 The Romance of a Spahi

About three o'clock the flotilla, which was to ascend the river as far as Dialdi in Galam, with its cargo of men, began to move and commenced its journey through the awful heat.

### X

SAINT LOUIS had receded in the distance. Its rows of buildings had faded away into bluey stripes amid the golden sand.

Upon each side of the river stretched as far as the eye could reach, big unhealthy plains, deserts, always warm and always mournful.

It was still but the entrance of this mighty land forgotten by God, the vestibule of the great African solitudes.

Jean and the spahis had embarked upon the *Falémé*, which led the way, and would soon be two days ahead of the rest.

Just before starting he had hurriedly written a reply to poor old Françoise. On reflection, he had disdained writing

## The Romance of a Spahi 225

to his fiancée ; but into the letter to his mother he had put his whole soul to console her and restore peace and hope to her mind.

“ Besides,” he had written, “ she was too well off for us. We shall find in the country another girl who will have me ; we will arrange to live in the old house, and in that way we shall be still near you. My dear parents, my only thought now is of the pleasure of seeing you again ; three months more and I shall be on my way home, and I swear to you, I will never, never leave you again.”

That was indeed his intention, and he thought every day of his dear old parents. But to share his life with some one else than Jeanne Méry spoiled the whole plan ; it was a terrible thought which threw a heavy mourning veil over his return. It was all he could do to recover his courage, for now it seemed to him that he had hardly any aim in life, and that the future was forever closed to him.

By his side upon the deck of the

## 226 The Romance of a Spahi

*Falémé* the giant Nyaor-fall was sitting, the black spahi to whom he had confided his grief as to his dearest friend.

Nyaor hardly understood Jean's feelings, for he had never been loved ; and he possessed beneath his thatched roof three wives he had purchased, whom he would sell again when they ceased to please him.

Still, he understood that his friend Jean was unhappy. He smiled pleasantly at him, and to distract him related negro stories dull enough to send him to sleep.

### XI

THE flotilla ascended the river as quickly as possible, halting at sunset and resuming the journey at daybreak.

At Richard-Toll, the first French post, men, negresses, and stores were again embarked.

"At Dacjana there was a two days' halt, and the *Falémé* received orders to go on

## The Romance of a Spahi 227

alone to Podor, the last post before reaching the district of Galam, where a few companies of sharpshooters were already assembled.

### XII

THE *Falémé* was still travelling between immense deserts ; she was rapidly making her way into the interior, following the narrow yellow stream which separates the Moorish Sahara from the mighty mysterious continent inhabited by the blacks.

Jean sadly gazed upon solitude after solitude as they passed. He followed the moving horizon, the sinuous ribbon of the Senegal which behind lost itself in the distance. These cursed plains which never-endingly unfolded themselves before his eyes, gave him a painful impression, an indefinable sinking of the heart, just as if the country were closing up behind him, and he would never return.

## 228 The Romance of a Spahi

Upon the dreary banks here and there gravely stalked big black vultures or a few bold marabouts quite human in their shape.\* Sometimes a curious monkey parted the mangrove boughs to watch the boat pass, or from a clump of reeds rose a fine white aigrette, or a kingfisher with its emerald shades, while their flights awakened a lazy alligator slumbering in the mud.

Upon the south bank, the bank of the sons of Ham, at long intervals they passed villages, buried in this vast desolation.

The presence of the human habitations was always indicated at a great distance by two or three gigantic fan-palms, which were a kind of tree-fetish to protect the villages.

In the midst of the immense bare plateau these palm trees seemed like giants on watch in the desert. Their straight and shining trunks, of a reddish grey, were swollen like Byzantine columns; and bore at the top little clusters of leaves as stiff as iron paddles.

## • The Romance of a Spahi 229

Soon as they drew nearer, a negro ant-heap could be distinguished of pointed huts, grouped in compact masses beneath the trees, forming a grey mass upon the yellow sand.

Sometimes these African cities were very large ; they were all surrounded by thick hedges, walls of earth and wood to protect them from their enemies or the wild beasts ; a strip of white cloth floating from a house loftier than the rest indicated the dwelling of their king. •

• At the gates in their ramparts appeared dark figures ; they were old chiefs, old priests covered with amulets, with long black arms which contrasted with the whiteness of their trailing robes. They watched the *Falémé* pass, which she did with rifles and artillery ready to reply to the slightest hostile movement.

The soldiers asked one another on what these men lived in this arid country ; what could the existence and occupation be behind those grey walls of those creatures who knew nothing of the outer

## 230 The Romance of a Spahi

world, and who spent their lives in these solitudes in the implacable sunlight.

Upon the north bank, that of the Sahara, there was still more sand and another panorama of desolation.

In the distance, the far distance, big grass fires had been lighted by the Moors ; columns of smoke rose straight up to a surprising height in the still air. Upon the horizon were chains of hills absolutely red like live coals, appearing with all these columns of smoke like brasiers without edges.

In a land where there was nothing but, drought and burning sand a continual mirage made appear great lakes in which all these fires were reflected bottom upwards.

Thin, quivering vapours, like those which rise from furnaces, cast over it all their mobile tracery ; these deceptive landscapes glittered and quivered in the intense heat ; and the onlookers saw them dissolve and change like visions ; the eyes were dazzled and wearied by the spectacle.

## ' The Romance of a Spahi 231

From time to time appeared on this bank groups of men of a pure white race—tanned and bronzed, it is true, but really handsome, with long curly hair which made them look like the prophets of the Bible. They moved about with bare heads in the sun, clad in long robes of dark blue. They were Moors of the tribe of the Braknas or Tzarzas, who were all of them bandits, pillagers, and robbers of caravans, and belonged to the worst of all African races.

### XIII

THE breeze from the east, which is like the powerful respiration of the Sahara, had grown stronger bit by bit, and increased in its intensity the further one travelled from the sea.

A parching wind, warm as the breath from a forge, now passed over the desert. It distributed everywhere a fine



## 232 The Romance of a Spahi

sandy dust, and brought with it ardent thirst.

Water was continually being poured over the awnings which sheltered the spahis ; a negro produced with a hose a rapid shower which disappeared as quickly as it fell, being converted into vapour almost at once in the thirsty atmosphere.

Now they were approaching Podor, one of the biggest towns upon the river, and the Sahara bank showed greater signs of life.

This was the beginning of the territory of the Douaïeh shepherds, who enriched themselves by their raids on the cattle in negro territory.

These Moors swam across the Senegal in long caravans, driving in front of them the animals they had stolen.

Camps began to appear upon this never-ending plain. The camel's-hair tents, resting upon wooden piles, looked like the big wings of bats stretched out upon the sand ; they formed strange designs of an intense blackness in the

## • The Romance of a Spahi 233

midst of this yellow land, which was always uniformly yellow. •

A little more animation appeared everywhere ; a little more movement and life.

Upon the banks larger groups ran down to the water's edge to watch them pass. Moorish women, copper-coloured beauties almost naked, having on their brows coral coronets, trotted along, sitting astride upon little humped cattle ; and very often behind them capered, mounted on tiny but restive calves, children—naked children, with heads shaven all but a big tuft of hair, and tawny muscular bodies like young satyrs.

### XIV

PODOR, an important French post upon the southern bank of the Senegal, is one of the hottest spots on earth.

It is a great fortress cracked by the sun. • •

It consists of an almost shady street,

## 234 The Romance of a Spahi

which runs parallel to the river, with a few old houses of melancholy appearance. French officials, turned yellow by fever and anæmia, are there, and Moorish or negro merchants squatting on the sand; while all sorts of costumes and all the amulets of Africa are on view with bags of nuts, bales of ostrich feathers, ivory, and gold.

Behind that half-European street lies a big thatched negro town, divided like a honeycomb by broad, straight streets, each quarter of this negro town being surrounded by thick wooden fences, and fortified like a citadel.

Jean strolled there in the evening with his friend Nyaor. The mournful songs which came from within the walls, the strange voices, the unaccustomed sights, and the hot wind which blew all through the night, gave him a feeling of vague terror, of inexplicable anguish, a mixture of nostalgia, solitude, and despair.

Never even at the distant posts of Diakhallémé had he felt so isolated and deserted.

## • The Romance of a Spahi 235

All around Podor were fields of millet, with a few stunted trees, bushes, and a little grass.

Facing the town upon the Moorish bank of the river was the open desert. Yet at the commencement of a road which had hardly been begun, and soon lost itself in the sand to the north, a signboard bore this prophetic inscription :

ROAD TO ALGIERS.

### XV

It was five o'clock in the morning ; the dull red sun was about to rise over the land of the Douïch ; Jean rejoined the *Falémé*, which was about to start.

The negress passengers were already lying upon the deck, rolled up in their many-coloured waist-cloths ; so tightly packed together were they that the deck appeared to be a confused mass of clothing gilded by the morning light, above

## 236 The Romance of a Spahi

which waved a few black arms loaded with heavy bracelets.

Jean, who was passing through the midst of them, suddenly felt himself clasped by two supple arms, which twined around his leg like two snakes.

The woman hid her face and kissed his feet.

“ Jean ! Jean ! ” said a little voice very familiar to him. “ Jean ! I have followed you for fear you die in the war ! Jean ! do you not want to look at your son ? ”

The two black arms held out a bronzed child towards the spahi.

“ My son ? My son ? ” Jean repeated with soldierly abruptness, but in a voice which trembled. “ My son ? What are you trying to make me believe, Fatou ? ”

“ It is nevertheless true,” he said, with strange emotion, stooping down to look at the child. “ It is true ; he is nearly white ! ”

The child did not take after his mother, he took altogether after Jean ; he was bronzed, but white as the spahi ; he had

## • The Romance of a Spahi 237

his big deep eyes, and was as handsome as his father. He held out his hands and watched, wrinkling his little forehead with a grave expression, as if trying to understand why he had come into the world, and how his Cévennes blood had become mingled with that impure black face.

Jean felt himself overcome by some inner power, full of trouble and mystery; he leant towards his son and kissed him gently, with silent affection. Sentiments up to that time unknown to him penetrated to the depths of his soul.

Fatou's voice had reawakened in his heart a host of sleeping echoes; the fever of the senses, the habit of possession had between them woven strong ties of such great persistence which separation could hardly destroy.

Besides, she was faithful to him at least after her own fashion; and he himself was so lonely.

He let her put around his neck an African amulet, and shared his rations with her.

## 238 The Romance of a Spahi

### XVI

THE boat continued her journey. The river wound more to the south, and the character of the country changed.

Shrubs now grew upon both banks, as well as slender gum trees, mimosas, light-leaved tamarisks, grass, and green bushes. The flora of the tropics had ceased; the vegetation appeared to be of that delicate nature found in the northern hemisphere. Apart from the excess of heat and silence, there was no indication that one was in the heart of Africa; a traveller would have thought he was ascending some peaceful European river.

Now a few native idylls were revealed to them as they passed. Beneath the bushes where all Watteau's flocks would have found room to feed, they sometimes came across a pair of African lovers in charge of skinny zebus or herds of goats.

Further on 'still other' flocks were

## • The Romance of a Spahi 239

grazing unattended, flocks of grey alligators slumbering in the sun in hundreds, with their stomachs half plunged in the tepid water.

Fatou was smiling. Her eyes were lit up with strange joy. She recognised the approaches to her native land of Galam.

One thing, however, made her uneasy ; every time she passed a big grassy morass or a dreary pool fringed with mangroves, she shut her eyes for fear she should see emerge from the stagnant water a black hippopotamus's muzzle, the appearance of which would have been for her and hers an omen of death.

It would be impossible to say how much cunning persistence and insinuation she had displayed in obtaining passage upon this boat on which she knew Jean had embarked.

Where had she taken refuge when she left her old home ? In what quarters had she found shelter to give birth to the spahi's child ?

Now she was happy ; she was going



## 240 The Romance of a Spahi

back to Galam, her native land, and she was returning there with him—it was the accomplishment of her dream.

### XVII

DIALDÉ was situated at the junction of the Senegal and a nameless river which flowed from the south.

A black village of no particular importance was situated there, protected by a small blockhouse of French building, which recalled the detached forts of the interior of Algeria.

That was the point nearest to the country of Boubakar-Ségou; there the French troops were to assemble and camp with their allies, the Bambaras, in the midst of friendly tribes.

In the neighbourhood of the village the flat country had that monotonous and arid appearance which characterised the banks of the lower Senegal.

There were, however, a few clumps of

## The Romance of a Spahi 241

trees, even forests, to be met with, which brought to mind the fact that the traveller was nearing the land of Galam and the leafy forests of its interior.

### XVIII

THE first reconnaissance to the east of the camp at Dialdé, in the direction of Djidiam, was made by Jean, Sergeant Muller, and the giant Nyaor.

. According to the account of the frightened old women, the tribes of their native allies, they had seen upon the sand the fresh footprints of a large body of men and horsemen, which could only be the army of the great black king.

For two hours the three spahis had ridden over the plain without discovering any human tracks upon the ground, or any trace of the passage of an army.

The ground was riddled with the footprints of all the beasts of Africa, from the big round hole made by the

## 242 The Romance of a Spahi

hippopotamus with his weighty foot, to "the little delicate triangle which the gazelle in his rapid flight traced with the mark of his hoofs. The sand, hardened by the last rains of the winter season, retained with perfect fidelity all the tracks the denizens of the desert had made in it. They met with the foot-prints of monkeys, the big ungainly foot-prints of the giraffes, the trails of lizards and serpents, and the claw-marks of leopards and lions ; it was possible to follow the comings and goings of the cunning jackals, the tremendous strides of the hinds when pursued ; it was possible to realise the terrible animation produced by the darkness in these deserts, which remained so silent while the sun cast his great flaming eye over them, and to reconstruct the nocturnal uproar of its wild animal life.

The three spahis started with their horses all the game concealed in the thickets ; it would have been a marvellous land for sport. The red partridges rose in front of their gun-barrels, and so

## • The Romance of a Spahi 243

did the blue and red jays, the metallic-noted merles, and the great bustards. They let them all go, still looking for the tracks of men without finding any.

The evening was approaching, and thick mists were gathering upon the horizon. The sky had that heavy motionless aspect which the imagination ascribes to the antediluvian sunsets, in the days when the atmosphere, being warmer and more fully charged with vital substances, scattered upon the virgin earth the monstrous germs of the mammoth and the plesiosaurus.

The sun sank gently into those strange veils ; it became dim, livid, rayless ; it lost its shape, grew out of all proportion, and then disappeared altogether.

Nyaor, who up to that time had followed Muller and Jean with his customary indifference, declared that the reconnaissance was becoming foolhardy, and that his two friends would be needlessly rash if they extended it still further.

The fact was that a surprise of any

## 244 The Romance of a Spahi

sort was possible, for around them everything was to be feared. In all directions the tracks of lions and tigers were fresh and numerous ; the horses began to falter, sniffing the fine claw-marks in the firm sand and trembling with fright.

Jean and Sergeant Muller, after holding a consultation, decided to turn back, and soon the three horses were galloping like the wind towards the blockhouse, with the burnouses of their riders streaming behind them. In the distance could be heard the formidable cavernous voice the Moors compare with thunder, the roar of a lion on the prowl.

The three soldiers who were galloping were brave men, yet they were suffering from a kind of vertigo which produced speed, a contagious fear which made their terrified mounts do their utmost. The rushes which lay in their path, the branches which brushed their legs, seemed to them like legions of desert lions at their heels.

They soon came in sight of the river which separated them from the French

## • The Romance of a Spahi 245

lines, the inhabited land, and the little Arab blockhouse of the village of Diablé, which was still illuminated by the red gleams of the setting sun. •

They swam their horses across the river and returned to camp.

### XIX

It was the time of the great evening sadness. Sunset brought about in this lonely village an original kind of animation. The black shepherds drove their flocks homewards ; the tribesmen, preparing for battle, set to work to sharpen their war-knives and polish their prehistoric rifles ; some of the women, too, were preparing supplies for the army, while others were milking their goats and skinning female zebus. A confused murmur of negroes' voices was audible, mingled with the plaintive bleating of the goats and the howling of the dogs.

Fatou was sitting at the gate of the

## 246 The Romance of a Spahi

blockhouse with her child, in the humble and suppliant attitude which, "since her return, she had maintained.

Jean, his heart cast down by solitude, seated himself by her side and took his child on his knees, his nature softened by the presence of his black offspring, so that he felt happy once more, and touched at finding in Djalbé of Galam some one who loved him.

By their side natives were singing their war songs ; they sang them softly in wailing falsetto voices, accompanying themselves on primitive little guitars, with two strings stretched over serpents' skins, which produced a tiny grasshopper-like sound ; they sang African tunes which harmonised well with the desolation of the land, with their imperceptible rhythm and monotony, though they had their charm.

Jean's son was a delightful child, but he was very serious and hardly ever seen to smile. He was dressed in a blue frock and necklace, like a native child ; but his head was not shaven in little tufts in

## • The Romance of a Spahi 247

the native fashion ; as he was a little white boy his mother had allowed his curly hair to grow, while a lock of it hung down upon his forehead, as the spahi's did.

Jean stayed there for a long while, sitting at the blockhouse gate playing with his boy.

The last rays of daylight illuminated this strange scene : the child with its little angel's face, and the spahi with his fine soldier's head, playing together by the side of the sinister black musicians.

Fatou was sitting at their feet ; she was gazing in adoration at both, from the ground in front of them, like a dog lying at his master's feet ; she appeared to be in an ecstasy in the presence of the good looks of Jean, who had begun to smile at her once more.

Poor Jean had remained very childish, as almost always happens to young fellows who have led a hard life, and to whom precocious physical development has given at an early age a mature and very serious manner. He dandled his



## 248 The Romance of a Spahi

son upon his knees with a soldier's clumsiness, and uttered again and again a fresh young laugh. But the spahi's son would hardly smile ; he put his chubby arms around his father's neck, clasped him to his breast, and looked on at everything with a most serious expression.

When night came, Jean installed them both in security in the interior of the blockhouse, then he gave Fatou all the money he had left, about fifteen francs.

"In the morning," he said, "buy provisions for yourself, and good milk for the boy."

### XX

JEAN afterwards set out for the camp to lie down and sleep.

He had to pass through the camp of their allies, the Bambaras, to reach the French lines. The night was transparent and luminous, with the buzzing of insects in the air ; one felt there were millions

## • The Romance of a Spahi 249

and millions of crickets and grasshoppers in the grass and in all the little holes in the sand ; sometimes the volume of sound swelled, became strident and almost deafening, as if the whole extent of the country had been covered with an infinite number of tiny bells and rattles ; and then for a time the sound seemed to die away, as if all the grasshoppers had received orders to make less noise.

Jean walked as in a dream ; he was very thoughtful that evening. As he went along rapt in his own thoughts, without looking where he was going, he found himself suddenly in the centre of a great ring of natives engaged in their most popular native dance.

They were men of great stature, these dancers, who had long white robes and high turbans, also white, with two black horns.

In the transparent darkness the circle moved nearly noiselessly, slowly but lightly, almost like a ring of spirits ; the sound of the rustling of their flowing

## 250 The Romance of a Spahi

draperies was like the fluttering of the feathers of mighty birds. The dancers altogether assumed diverse poses : standing upon tiptoe, leaning forwards or backwards, or shooting out together their long arms, which unfolded, like transparent wings, the thousand folds of their muslin garments.

The tam-tam was beating gently as if muffled ; wailing flutes and ivory horns uttered muted and seemingly distant notes. A monotonous tune, which sounded like a magic incantation, was the accompaniment of the Bambaras' dance.

As they passed in front of the spahi the dancers all bowed their heads in token of recognition ; with a smile they said :

“ Jean ! join our dance ! ”

Jean recognised almost all of them in their robes : they were black spahis or sharpshooters, who had returned to their long white robes and were wearing their festival head-dresses.

With a smile he said as they passed :  
“ Good night, Niodagal, Inobé-Fafandou, Dempa-Taco, Samba-Fall, and big

## • The Romance of a Spahi 251

Nyaor." For Nyaor was one of the finest and best-looking among them. •

But Jean hastened on all the same, to break through the long line of white-robed dancers, who wound in and out around him. This dance made a great impression on him in the darkness, and so did the music, which seemed to him to be that of another world. •

Still using the same phrase, "Jean, join our dance!" they continued to move around him like visions, amused by the idea that they were encircling the spahi, and hastening to extend their turning circle to prevent him from breaking through it.

### XXI

•  
WHEN the spahi had retired to rest in his tent, he began to formulate in his mind a hundred fresh schemes.

Certainly he would first of all return home to see his old parents; nothing

## 252 The Romance of a Spahi

could make him put off his departure. But afterwards he would have to return to Africa, now he had a son. He felt that he already loved the little boy with all his heart, and that nothing on earth would cause him to make up his mind to abandon him.

Outside in the camp of the Bambaras sounded at regular intervals the voices of the singers who in their wailing notes were singing their holy war-song. They sang this owl-like song to the sleepers in their tents, and hushed to sleep the black warriors with exhortations to be brave and to put several bullets in their carbines at once when the day of battle came. One felt that this day was at hand, and that Boubakar-Ségou was not far off.

What should he do at Saint Louis when he returned there to find his son, after his time had expired? Should he rejoin, or should he tempt fortune with some adventurous scheme?

Should he become a Government official of the river? No, he felt an

## • The Romance of a Spahi 253

invincible dislike for any other occupation than agriculture or arms. •

Every sound of life had now died away in the village of Dialdé, and the camp, too, was silent. The roar of the lion sounded at a distance, and now and then the most mournful sound in the whole world, the yelping of the jackal. It was just like a funereal accompaniment to the poor spahi's dreams!

All the same, the presence of this little child entirely altered all his plans and greatly complicated his difficulties of the future.

“ Jean, join our dance ! ”

Jean was half asleep, worn out by his long ride during the day, and while thinking of the future he in a dream saw again the circle of the Bambaras winding round him in their dance. They passed and repassed with mechanical gestures and the attitudes of death, to the accompaniment of indistinct music, which was no longer of this earth.

“ Jean, join our dance ! ” •

Their heads, which bowed to greet

## 254 The Romance of a Spahi

Jean, seemed to bend beneath the weight of their lofty head-dresses. Now they were grimacing features, dead faces which bowed to him with an air of acquaintance-ship, and uttered quite low with phantom-like smiles : “ Jean, join our dance ! ”

Then bit by bit fatigue completed the numbing of Jean's brain, and he fell into a deep dreamless slumber before making up his mind about anything.

### XXII

It was broad daylight on the morning of the battle.

At three o'clock in the morning the camp at Daldé was astir ; spahis, sharpshooters, and their Bambaraş allies were preparing to march with their arms and supplies.

The Marabouts had offered up long prayers ; many talismans had been distributed. The carbines of the black

## • The Romance of a Spahi 255

warriors had, as in the days of great battles, been filled by order of their chiefs half full of powder and right up to the muzzles with lead ; so tightly were they packed that most of them would burst at the first discharge, as usually happens in wars in which blacks are engaged.

They were to march towards the village of Djidiam, where, according to the native spies, Boubakar-Ségou was entrenched with his army, behind thick wooden and mud walls. Djidiam was the great stronghold of this almost legendary personage, the terror of the land, a sort of myth whose strength lay in his ability to flee and conceal himself in the depths of his murderous land, where he was almost impregnable.

The plan of campaign was to camp in the afternoon in the great woods bordering upon the enemy's head-quarters, and in order to put an end to the war, to fall upon Djidiam under cover of darkness, set fire to the village, which would burn in the moonlight like a bonfire of straw,



## 256 The Romance of a Spahi

and then return to Saint Louis before fever had decimated their ranks.

The previous evening Jean had written a most affectionate letter, poor pencil scrawl though it was, which went down the river that very day on board the *Falémé*, and must have been very sweet to his old mother's heart.

A little before sunrise he kissed his boy, who was still asleep in the arms of Fatou, and mounted his horse.

### XXIII

IN the morning Fatou also set out with her son. She was on her way to Nialoumbaé, a village belonging to their allies, where a great Marabout resided, a priest famous in the art of prophecy and witchcraft.

She was taken to the centenarian's hut, and found him squatting upon his mat, and muttering, like a dying man, prayers to his God.

## The Romance of a Spahi 257

They had a long talk, after which the priest gave the girl a little leather bag, which appeared to contain something of great value as she fastened it most carefully in her girdle.

After that the priest gave Jean's child a sleeping draught. Fatou offered in payment three big coins, the last of the spahi's money, which the old man put into his purse; then in an embroidered waist-cloth she lovingly wrapped her son, who was already deep in a magic sleep. She fastened to her back her precious burden, and had pointed out to her the direction of the woods in which at night the French soldiers were to camp.

### XXIV

THE time was seven o'clock in the morning; the place a lone spot in the territory of Diambour, a swamp full of herbage surrounding a small pool of water. A

## 258 The Romance of a Spahi

low hill formed the horizon to the north ; in the opposite direction, as far as the eye could reach, was the big plain of Dialakar. "

All was silent and deserted ; the sun gradually mounted in the cloudless sky.

Horsemen appeared in this African landscape, which would have been quite in keeping with some lonely land of ancient Gaul. Sitting up straight upon their horses, they looked very handsome in their red tunics, blue breeches, and big white head-dresses surmounting their bronzed faces.

They were twelve spahis sent out as scouts in charge of an officer, and Jean was amongst them.

No foreboding of death, nothing funereal was in the air, everything was calm without a cloud in the sky. In the morass the tall grass, still damp with the night dew, glistened in the sun ; the dragon-flies with their big black spotted wings were flitting hither and thither ; the water-lilies were opening their big white blossoms on the pool.

## The Romance of a Spahi 259

The heat was already oppressive ; the horses stretched their necks to drink, and opened their nostrils, sniffing the stagnant water. The spahis stopped for a moment to hold a consultation ; they dismounted to damp their caps and bathe their foreheads.

Suddenly in the distance deep sounds became audible, like notes of an enormous drum.

“ The big tam-tams ! ” said Sergeant Muller, who had several times been on active service in the land of the blacks.

Instinctively all those who had dismounted rushed to their horses.

But a black head appeared to rise out of the grass close to them ; an old Marabout had made with his skinny arm a strange signal, like a magic command addressed to the reeds of the marsh, and a rain of lead fell upon the spahis.

The shots, fired deliberately and in safety from the cover of the ambushade, had all told. Five or six horses dropped ; the others, surprised and terrified, galloped off, knocking down their wounded

## 260 The Romance of a Spahi

riders, and Jean also dropped to the ground with a bullet in his thigh.

At the same time thirty dark heads emerged from the undergrowth, thirty black demons, covered with mud, jumped out grinding their teeth like furious monkeys.

It was a heroic combat of which Homer would have delighted to have sung, but which, like so many more in far-off Africa, will remain forever obscure and unknown. The poor spahis displayed prodigies of valour and strength in their last stand. The battle inflamed them, as it does every one courageous by nature who is born brave ; they sold their lives dearly, did those men, all of whom were young, strong, and well trained. In a few years even at Saint Louis they will be forgotten. Who will repeat their names, the names of those who fell in the land of Diambour in the plains of Dialakar ?

Still the sound of the great tam-tams drew nearer.

Suddenly, during the mêlée the spahis,

## The Romance of a Spahi 261

as in a dream, saw pass over the hill a big black army ; half naked-warriors were hastening in the direction of Dialdé in ragged groups ; with them were enormous war-drums, which four men had great difficulty in dragging along, and slender horses of the desert which seemed full of fire and fury, in their ragged trappings plated with copper, while their long manes and tails were tinted blood-red. The whole composed a fantastic demoniac troop, an African nightmare more rapid than the wind.

It was Boubakar-Ségou who was passing by.

He was on his way to fall upon the French column. He passed without even noticing the spahis, leaving it to the troops who had ambushed them to complete their extermination.

They were still being driven away from the grass and water towards the arid sand, where the overwhelming heat and its even more dreadful reverberation would exhaust them more quickly.

They had no time to reload their

## 262 The Romance of a Spahi

rifles ; they fought with knives, sabres, their nails and teeth ; everywhere, were great gaping wounds and bleeding entrails. c

Two black men had set upon Jean. He was stronger than they were ; he rolled them over and upset them in his rage, but they always came back.

In the end his hands lost their grip of the black skins oily and bare ; his fingers slipped in blood ; then he grew weaker from his many wounds.

He saw in dazed fashion this last picture : his dead comrades lying by his side, and the main body of the black army still hurrying on its way and almost out of sight in the distance, and that fine fellow Muller, with the death-rattle in his throat, not far away from him, with blood flowing from his mouth. Below him, already far away, was the giant Nyaor cutting a path for himself in the direction of Saldé, and launching mighty sabre-thrusts into the midst of a group of blacks.

## · The Romance of a Spahi 263

Then three of the negroes overcame him, turned him on his side, holding his arms, and one of them pressed against his chest a big steel knife.

A moment's fearful anguish, Jean endured while he felt the pressure of this knife against his body. There was no human aid at hand, nothing at all, for the rest of his comrades had fallen!

The red cloth of his tunic, the thick stuff of his soldier's shirt, and his flesh made a pad and resisted: the knife was blunt!

· The negro pressed harder. Jean uttered a loud and raucous cry and suddenly his side gave way. The blade with a horrible little grating sound plunged into his broad chest; it was thrust further into the wound, then drawn out with both hands and the corpse received a kick.

He was the last of the devoted band. The black demons went on their way uttering their shout of victory; in a moment they had gone like the wind in the direction their army had taken.



## 264 The Romance of a Spahi

The spahis were left alone, and the calm of death had begun for them.

### XXV

THE meeting of the two armies took place some distance away ; it was a very murderous affray, although it was not very fully reported in France.

These battles, fought in these far-off lands, in which small bodies of men are engaged, pass unnoticed by the public ; those who have lost a son or brother in them are the only ones to remember.

The small French force was weakening, when Boubakar-Ségou received near the finish a charge of buckshot in the right temple. The black king's brains flowed in a white stream from his head ; to the sound of the drum and cymbals he fell in the midst of his priests, entangled in his long chaplets of amulets, and his fall was the signal to his tribe to retreat.

The black army made its way towards

## • The Romance of a Spahi 265

• the impenetrable districts of the interior, and their flight was not disturbed. The French troopers were not in a condition to pursue.

• The red head-dress of the great rebel chief, scorched and full of shot-holes, was taken back to Saint Louis.

A long sash of talismans was attached to it ; there were variously embroidered satchels, containing mysterious powders, cabalistic designs, and prayers in the tongue of Maghreb.

This death produced a very great moral effect on the native population.

The battle was followed by the surrender of several insurgent chieftains, and it could be regarded in the light of a victory.

The column returned quickly to Saint Louis ; several promotions and medals were conferred upon those who had taken part in the engagement, but the ranks of the poor spahis had been considerably thinned.

## 266 The Romance of a Spahi

"

XXVI

JEAN, dragging himself beneath the thin foliage of the tamarisks, found a place where his head would be shaded, and lay down there to die.

He was thirsty with a devouring thirst, and little convulsive movements began to work his throat.

He had often seen his comrades die in Africa, and he knew the mournful signs of the approach of the end, which people call the death-rattle.

Blood flowed from his side, and the arid sand drank up his blood like dew.

Still he suffered less ; but for the thirst which unceasingly burned his throat, he hardly suffered at all now.

The poor spahi had strange visions : the chain of the Cévennes, the familiar spots of his youth, and the thatched cottage in the mountains appeared to him. He in particular saw shady landscapes, deep shadows, moss, freshness and running water, and his dear old

## • The Romance of a Spahi 267

mother who gently held his hand to take him home, as she used to do in his childhood.

Oh ! a mother's kiss ! His mother was there kissing his forehead held between her poor old hands, and sprinkling fresh water upon his burning brow.

What ! would he never again receive a mother's kiss, never again hear her voice ! Never, never again ! It was the end of everything ! Alone, quite alone, he would die there in the sun in the desert ! He half rose, being unwilling to die.

“ Jean, join our dance ! ”

Before him, like a whirling squall, like the furious gusts of a storm, a circle of phantoms passed.

From the contact of this rush with the burning sand sparks flew.

The diaphanous dancers, ascending in rapid spirals, like smoke swept away by the wind, were lost far above in the glare of the blue sky.

Jean experienced the sensation of following them, of being borne away

## 268 The Romance of a Spahi

upon terrible wings, and he thought it was death's supreme moment.

But it was only a contraction of the muscles, a great and horrible spasm of suffering.

A jet of red blood flowed from his mouth, a voice spoke again, whispering close to his temples :

“ Jean, join our dance.”

Then, more calmly and in less agony, he again subsided upon his bed of sand.

Memories of his childhood rushed in crowds through his brain with extraordinary clearness. He could hear an old country tune, with which his mother used to hush him to sleep when a tiny boy in his cradle ; and then suddenly the bells of his native village rang out distinctly in the midst of the desert, the evening “ Angelus.”

Then tears coursed down his bronzed cheeks ; his prayers of bygone days came back to his mind, and the poor soldier began to pray with childish fervour ; he took in his hand an image of the Virgin his mother had fastened

## • The Romance of a Spahi 269

round his neck ; he had strength to raise it to his lips, and he kissed it with immense love. He prayed with his whole soul to this Virgin of sorrows, whom his simple mother every evening entreated on his behalf ; he was quite illuminated with the radiant illusions of those about to die, and aloud in the overwhelming silence of the solitude his rapidly disappearing voice repeated these eternal words of death : “ Till we meet again in Heaven ! ”

It was then about midday. Jean's sufferings grew less ; the desert, in the intense tropical light, appeared to him like a mighty brasier of white fire, the heat had now ceased to burn him. Still his chest expanded as if to obtain more air ; his mouth opened as if to ask for water.

Then the lower jaw dropped altogether ; the mouth opened wide for the last time, and Jean died quite quietly in the dazzling sunlight.

## 270 The Romance of a Spahi

### XXVII

WHEN Fatou returned from the village of the "great Marabout, carrying a mysterious object in a leather bag, the women of the tribe of the allies told her that the battle was over.

She returned to camp, anxious, hesitating, exhausted, with feverish steps over the hot sand, carrying on her back her baby, rolled up in a piece of blue stuff, and still asleep.

The first person she saw was the Mussulman Nyaor-fall, the black spahi, who gravely watched her approach, as he held his long Mahgreb chaplet.

In the native tongue she addressed to him jerkily these three words :

"Where is he ?"

Nyaor, with a contemplative gesture, stretched his arms towards the south of the country of Diambourg, in the direction of the plains of Dialakar.

"There !" he said. "He has gained Paradise."

## The Romance of a Spahi 27

### XXVIII

ALL day Fatou walked feverishly through the undergrowth, across the sand, still carrying her sleeping child upon her back. She went and came, at times running, with the demeanour of a panther which had lost its young ; she sought everywhere beneath the burning sun, probing the bushes, and searching the thorny thickets.

About three o'clock, upon an arid plain, she saw a dead horse, then a red tunic, then two, then three. It was the line of retreat ; here the spahis had fallen.

Here and there scrubby bushes of mimosa or tamarisk threw on the yellow sand attenuated shadows which seemed crumbled by the sun. In the far distance, at the extremity of this almost illimitable plain, the silhouette of a village with pointed huts appeared against the deep blue horizon.



## 272 The Romance of a Spahi

Fatou stopped, trembling and terrified. She had recognised him, stretched with stiffened arms and open mouth in the sun, and she recited some Pagan invocation as she touched the charms hanging from her dusky neck.

She stayed there a long while muttering in low tones, with haggard eyes, the whites of which were suffused with red patches.

She saw approaching from a distance the old women of the hostile tribe, who were going towards the dead, and she suspected something horrible.

The old negresses, hideous and gleaming in the torrid sun, trailing a bitter odour behind them, approached the bodies of the young men; they moved them with their feet, with laughter, obscene gestures, and burlesque words which seemed like the cries of monkeys; they violated the dead with dismal buffoonery.

Then they despoiled them of their gilt buttons, which they put in their

## • The Romance of a Spahi 273

fuzzy hair ; they took their steel spurs, their red tunics and belts.

Fatou was crouching behind her bush, like a cat ready to spring upon its prey ; when Jean's turn came she rushed out with claw-like fingers, uttering animal cries and cursing the women in an unknown tongue. The child, who had awakened, clung to the back of his furious and terrible mother.

The black women were frightened and drew back.

Their arms, too, were full enough of booty ; they thought they could return on the morrow. They exchanged words Fatou could not understand, and went away, turning back to hurl their ferocious laughter at her, like the mockery of the chimpanzee.

When Fatou was alone, crouching by Jean's side, she called him by his name. She cried out three times : " Jean ! Jean ! Jean ! " in a shrill voice which echoed in this solitude like the voice of the ancient priestess calling the dead. She was crouching there beneath Africa's

## 274 The Romance of a Spahi

implaçable sun, with staring eyes looking unseeingly into space at the mournful and blazing horizon ; she was afraid to look at Jean's face.

The vultures impudently swooped down in their flight near her, beating the heavy air with their big black wings. They were prowling around the corpses, not yet venturing any closer, considering them too fresh.

Fatou noticed the image of the Virgin in the spahi's hand ; she understood that at the approach of death he had offered up a prayer. She, too, had an image of the Virgin and a scapular among the charms which hung around her neck ; at Saint Louis the Catholic priests had baptised her, but it was not in them she had faith.

She took a leather amulet which in the past in the land of Galam a black woman, her mother, had given her. That was the fetish she loved and kissed affectionately.

Then she leant over Jean's body and lifted his head.

## The Romance of a Spahi 275

From the open mouth, between the white teeth, emerged blue flies, and a liquid flowed from the awesome wounds in the thorax. •

### XXIX

THEN she took her child to strangle him, as she did not want to hear his cries. She filled his mouth with sand.

• Nor did she desire to see his little face convulsed by asphyxiation ; in her rage she dug a hole in the sand, put his head in it, and covered it with sand.

Then with her two hands she squeezed his neck ; she squeezed and squeezed more tightly till the strong little limbs which stiffened in their pain fell back inert.

When the child was dead, she laid him upon his father's chest.

In this way the son of Jean Peyral died. A mystery ! What • God had given the spahi's child life ? Who had

## 276 The Romance of a Spahi

come to seek the boy on earth, and whence did he return ?

Fatou then wept tears of blood, and her groans echoed in heartrending fashion over the plains of Dialakar. Afterwards she took the Marabout's leather pouch, and swallowed a bitter paste it had contained ; fier agony at once began, a long and cruel agony. For a long while she lay in the sun with the death-rattle in her throat, with terrible sobs, tearing her throat with her nails and plucking out her hair mixed with amber.

The vultures gathered round her, watching her end.

### XXX

WHEN the yellow sun set upon the plains of Diambour, the death-rattle had ceased, the girl's sufferings had ended.

She was lying upon Jean's body, clasping in her stiff arms her dead son.

## • The Romance of a Spahi 277

The first night fell upon these corpses warm and starry, with the noise of the wild animal life, which had begun mysteriously in undertones, swelling in every direction on Africa's sombre land.

. . . . .

The same evening, the wedding procession of Jeanne passed, at the foot of the Cévennes, before the thatched cottage of the old Peyrals.

### XXXI

### APOTHEOSIS

FIRST of all, it is like a distant groaning proceeding from the extreme horizon of the desert ; then the mournful concert draws nearer through the transparent darkness, and resolves itself into the melancholy howling of the jackals and the shrill yelps of the hyenas and tiger-cats.

Poor mother, poor old woman! That human form seen vaguely in the shadows,

## 278 The Romance of a Spahi

which is outstretched there in the midst of this solitude with open mouth beneath the star-studded sky, which is sleeping there at the hour the animals awake, and will never again rise up—poor mother, poor old woman!—that deserted corpse is your son!

“Jean! join the dance!”

The famished pack creep softly up in the darkness, parting the grass and breaking through the undergrowth; in the light of the stars it attacks the bodies of the young men and begins the meal blind nature demands: everything which lives feeds, in some shape or other, on what is dead.

The man, in his still hand, continues to hold the image of the Virgin; the woman still grasps her charms. Watch well over them, precious amulets!

To-morrow great bald vultures will carry on the work of destruction, and their bones will be dragged over the sand, scattered by all the beasts of the desert, while their skulls will whiten in the sun, ransacked by the wind and the locusts.

• The Romance of a Spāhi 279

! Old parents by the fireside in the thatched cottage, father bowed by age, who dreams of a son, of the fine young fellow in the red tunic; old mother who prays every night for the absent one, old parents, await your son, *await the spāhi!*

HERE ENDS

• THE ROMANCE OF A SPAHI.



**PRINTED BY**  
**WILLIAM BRENDON AND SON, LTD.**  
**PLYMOUTH**









